United Nations S/PV.5857

Security Council

Sixty-third year

Provisional

5857th meeting

Thursday, 20 March 2008, 10.25 a.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Churkin	(Russian Federation)
Members:	Belgium	Mr. Verbeke
	Burkina Faso	Mr. Kafando
	China	Mr. Liu Zhenmin
	Costa Rica	Mr. Urbina
	Croatia	Mr. Jurica
	France	Mr. Ripert
	Indonesia	Mr. Natalegawa
	Italy	Mr. Spatafora
	Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	Mr. Ettalhi
	Panama	Mr. Arias
	South Africa	Mr. Kumalo
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Sir John Sawers
	United States of America	Mr. Khalilzad
	Viet Nam	Mr. Le Luong Minh

Agenda

The situation in Afghanistan

Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security (S/2008/159)

This record contains the text of speeches delivered in English and of the interpretation of speeches delivered in the other languages. The final text will be printed in the *Official Records of the Security Council*. Corrections should be submitted to the original languages only. They should be incorporated in a copy of the record and sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned to the Chief of the Verbatim Reporting Service, room C-154A.

The meeting was called to order at 10.25 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in Afghanistan

Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security (S/2008/159)

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I should like to inform the Council that I have received a letter from the representative of Afghanistan, in which he requests to be invited to participate in the consideration of the item on the Council's agenda. In conformity with the usual practice, I propose, with the consent of the Council, to invite that representative to participate in the consideration of the item, without the right to vote, in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Charter and rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

At the invitation of the President, Mr. Tanin (Afghanistan) took a seat at the Council table.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

Members of the Council have before them document S/2008/185, which contains the text of a draft resolution prepared in the course of the Council's prior consultations. Members of the Council also have before them document S/2008/159, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security.

It is my understanding that the Council is ready to proceed to vote on the draft resolution before it. Unless I hear any objection, I shall now put the draft resolution to the vote now.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

A vote was taken by show of hands.

In favour:

Belgium, Burkina Faso, China, Costa Rica, Croatia, France, Indonesia, Italy, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Panama, Russian Federation, South Africa, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America, Viet Nam

The President (*spoke in Russian*): There were 15 votes in favour. The draft resolution has been adopted unanimously as resolution 1806 (2008).

I shall now give the floor to members of the Council who wish to make statements following the voting.

Mr. Spatafora (Italy): I wish to briefly take the floor in order to thank all delegations for their very constructive, flexible and strong support during the consultations on this resolution, as well as to express our full satisfaction with the outcome. Once again, the Council is rallying strongly and united behind one of the most important missions of the United Nations.

We are convinced that this text meets all the expectations expressed in the report (S/2008/159) of the Secretary-General and in the briefing by Under-Secretary-General Guéhenno on 12 March. The Secretary-General recommended that the Mission's mandate be sharpened. Indeed, the resolution was conceived and discussed in that spirit. In fact, not only are we extending the mandate of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) for a further 12 months, we are also offering the Mission clear guidance on the priorities to take forward within the mandate in the coming months: enhanced coordination of, and leadership on, international efforts; strengthened cooperation with the International Security Assistance Force; political outreach; national reconciliation; governance; humanitarian assistance; the promotion of human rights; elections; and regional cooperation.

The resolution also highlights what we have perceived as the main feature of the 12 March debate: the need for all the activities of the Mission and of the international community at large to be guided by the overarching principle of reinforcing Afghan ownership and leadership.

Finally, we are pleased with the focus of the United Nations on some crucial horizontal issues, namely, the protection of civilians, children and armed conflict, women and peace and security. It is now the duty of the entire international community to translate the resolution into concrete support for UNAMA, in particular for the efforts of the newly appointed Special

Representative of the Secretary-General. I am confident that he will receive from all Member States and from the Headquarters of the United Nations the necessary resources and political support to fulfil his daunting task.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): There are no further speakers inscribed on my list. The Security Council has thus concluded the present stage of its consideration of the item on its agenda.

The meeting rose at 10.30 a.m.

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Agenda

The situation in Somalia

Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Somalia (S/2008/178)

This record contains the text of speeches delivered in English and of the interpretation of speeches delivered in the other languages. The final text will be printed in the *Official Records of the Security Council*. Corrections should be submitted to the original languages only. They should be incorporated in a copy of the record and sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned to the Chief of the Verbatim Reporting Service, room C-154A.

The meeting was called to order at 10.30 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in Somalia

Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Somalia (S/2008/178)

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I should like to inform the Council that I have received letters from the representatives of Somalia and Uganda, in which they request to be invited to participate in the consideration of the item on the Council's agenda. In conformity with the usual practice, I propose, with the consent of the Council, to invite those representatives to participate in the consideration of the item, without the right to vote, in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Charter and rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

At the invitation of the President, Mr. Duale (Somalia) took a seat at the Council table; Mr. Butagira (Uganda) took the seat reserved for him at the side of the Council Chamber.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Ahmedou Ould Abdallah, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Somalia.

It is so decided.

I invite Mr. Ould Abdallah to take a seat at the Council table.

In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Edmond Mulet, Assistant Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations.

It is so decided.

I invite Mr. Mulet to take a seat at the Council table.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

Members of the Council have before them document S/2008/178, containing the report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Somalia.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear briefings by Mr. Ahmedou Ould Abdallah, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Somalia, and Mr. Edmond Mulet, Assistant Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations.

I now give the floor to Mr. Ould Abdallah.

Mr. Ould Abdallah: Last week, Somalia's Transitional Federal Government announced its reconciliation strategy, which involves local peacemaking within the country and talks with the external opposition. That was widely welcomed. The Government's plan called for me to lead that process, and I am fully committed to helping the various parties come together for preliminary talks. I hope to determine the timing and location of those discussions soon.

In that connection, I would like to congratulate the Somalis themselves, my fellow diplomats in charge of Somalia and the members of the International Contact Group. When I addressed the Security Council last December, I called for an end to the costly 17 years of a business-as-usual policy that has yet to bring peace to the country. Since I made that speech, there has been a new approach to addressing the conflict and some indications of progress both inside and outside the country.

In full agreement with President Yusuf, Prime Minister Hussein has chosen a new and leaner Cabinet, half of whose members come from outside the parliament. It was welcomed both nationally and internationally. In another sign of progress, the Government moved to Mogadishu in January.

I spent three days in Somalia recently and held joint discussions with the President, the Speaker and the Prime Minister, who assured me of their commitment to reconciliation. I addressed the parliament, which is backing the peace initiative. I also held meetings with the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia. I am continuing to engage in regular contacts with all sides. I visited Brussels, Cairo and

Addis Ababa for consultations with Governments and international organizations. I will soon go to other countries, including the United Republic of Tanzania, which is chairing the African Union.

Up until now, international attention has essentially focused on Somalia's failings. In order to do justice to the people's resilience and courage, I broadened the agenda by organizing a conference of Somali and international businesspeople in January, to discuss how the private sector can help move the country from a wartime to a peacetime economy. Building on the success of that conference, I am convening a larger follow-up summit later next week, which will be opened by the Somali Prime Minister and attended by international figures.

We need to recognize and encourage the efforts made by Somalis themselves in terms of trade, telecommunications and infrastructure. They are encouraging developments, but they are not enough. While more people are now talking about Somalia, there is little action to stop the violence and opportunism. I believe that Somalia remains a prisoner of the past, never having been forgiven for the violent actions carried out against the international community in the 1990s. There is, it seems, either a reluctance to go back there or a deliberate decision to punish all Somalis, many of whom had not even been born when the last international intervention occurred.

What is needed now is engagement by the international community. I am not asking outside countries to become active for moral or altruistic reasons. They have a clearly mandated responsibility to become involved in a country where there are widespread violations of human rights and humanitarian law. The concept of the responsibility to protect was adopted at the 2005 World Summit of leaders and later endorsed by the Security Council.

Indeed, today too much time is spent collecting numbers and statistics concerning the suffering of the Somali people. The real battle to be won is the battle to be close to and to protect the victims of armed violence, human rights abuses, drought and famine.

In my last speech I called for simultaneous action on the political and security fronts. Those two tracks are undoubtedly closely intertwined. Today we have some progress on the political front with the Government reconciliation plan. As the two tracks should advance together and reinforce each other, there is a need for similar action on the security front. Acting only on one of them — the political front — is like limping along on one leg.

The Ugandan and Burundian troops are doing an excellent job, which is clearly the responsibility of the whole international community. They deserve our thanks. Indeed, as indicated in the letter of 20 September 2007 from the Secretary-General to the President of the Security Council, the security options should not be limited only to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) or United Nations troops. A strong interim multinational presence could also be an option. This would involve the friends of Somalia contributing political support, funds and troops to stabilize the situation, preferably under a lead country. I will continue my efforts in that direction.

More can be done to protect ships carrying humanitarian assistance, as initiated by France last December. Denmark has now taken over the same task of escorting ships, and I understand that the Netherlands has volunteered to continue the work. I believe that such protection should be expanded into a United Nations task force, the mission of which would be to protect United Nations humanitarian supplies, deter human smuggling, reduce piracy and support the arms embargo. I have just engaged the services of a retired general to prepare a paper on piracy off the Somali coast.

For our work to be truly credible, we need to deploy many more international staff inside the country. That concerns the whole United Nations country team — and, indeed, my office — and would follow the example of the respected International Committee of the Red Cross in Mogadishu. Being far more visible inside the country would allow all of us to closely engage with Somalis, identify their needs, assist them and restore the reputation of the United Nations. No other institution would benefit more from such a move than the Security Council, which, in my opinion, should visit Somalia this year.

To facilitate those efforts to improve stability and encourage increased the numbers of international staff in Somalia, we will need to accelerate security sector reform and the training of the police force.

I see all the measures I have just mentioned as a series of peacebuilding steps that can be undertaken in the short term and would help stability.

The international community also needs to address the question of impunity. Countless lives have been lost and thousands forced from their homes. Those responsible for the violence continue to profit from the misery of others. We have appeased the warlords, the extremists and the spoilers for too long by wielding the carrot but not the stick. Those who have carried out war crimes and crimes against humanity need to be brought to account through the International Criminal Court or another international or local body. There could be a commission of inquiry to look into the most serious crimes. The independent expert could also be more involved in addressing the issue of human rights.

Those solutions cannot all be imposed from outside. Somalis themselves need to change their approach. The "winner-takes-all" attitude, which leaves no room for power-sharing, has destroyed the country and its reputation. Compromise in negotiation, as demonstrated in the Agreement of Al Hudaibiyya — which is very important in Muslim countries — between the Prophet Mohammed and the people of Mecca, would benefit everyone. Reconciliation will profit all, from businessman and farmers to politicians and warlords.

Obviously the situation in Somalia is very complex. Our analysis should therefore not be based on partisan or inaccurate news reports, which are particularly popular with computer users. To enable us to make the right decisions, a level-headed analysis should be based on firsthand information and expertise on the issues and in the field. An ideological or dogmatic approach should give way to continued flexibility and due respect for the basic United Nations principles of caring for populations and maintaining peace.

In conclusion, Mr. President, in the past, your country has helped Somalia, in particular with building airports, which we still use today for travel to the country. Under your presidency, it would be symbolic if the whole Council could agree on concrete steps to show the same compassion for Somalia and its people as it has demonstrated elsewhere in Africa.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I now give the floor to Mr. Mulet.

Mr. Mulet (*spoke in French*): Allow me to thank you, Mr. President, for having granted me this opportunity to present to Council members the recommendations of the fact-finding mission to Somalia, which was led by the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. The mission was dispatched in response to the presidential statement of 19 December 2007 (S/PRST/2007/49), in which you tasked the Secretariat to consider further support to the African Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and to update contingency planning for a possible United Nations peacekeeping operation to succeed AMISOM.

The mission visited the region from 7 to 25 January 2008 and consulted the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Somalia, Mr. Ahmedou Ould Abdallah, the African Union and regional and Somali stakeholders. The mission visited Merka, Baidoa and Kismayo and spent three days in Mogadishu, where it met with the Prime Minister and other Government Ministers and assessed the security situation on the ground.

It was the first United Nations mission to visit Kismayo since the resumption of armed conflict at the start of the second half of 2006. In Mogadishu, the team visited various districts of the capital to assess the security situation.

In assessing possibilities for a United Nations peacekeeping operation in Somalia, the fact-finding mission conducted a comprehensive analysis of the security situation, including threats and risks to the security of United Nations personnel. In that regard, it is important to note that the situation is not the same throughout the country. Security conditions in the north are relatively more stable than those in central and southern Somalia. In those areas, the conflict remains extremely complex, characterized by inextricable alliances between clans, sub-clans and extremist elements, fighting for control of political and economic space, and temporary alliances of some groups, aimed at forcing the withdrawal of the Ethiopian Armed Forces from the country.

As the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) has limited capacity to regulate economic activity and maintain law and order, criminal and other armed elements are free to control the collection of revenues from customs, the port and commerce, as well as those generated by and water and land distribution. In addition, such groups engage in the trafficking of arms, drugs and human beings. Political tensions within and between clans are driven by control over resources. In many cases such tensions are linked to the activities of criminal and insurgent elements but cannot be separated from them.

(*spoke in English*)

The continued threat of abduction, kidnapping and extortion limits the capacity of United Nations and humanitarian agencies to operate in the country. At the same time, the United Nations country team estimates that the size of the population in need of humanitarian aid is now approaching 2 million people.

The general security trend in Mogadishu appears proportional to the level of military efforts undertaken by the Ethiopian armed forces and the Transitional Federal Government coalition to defeat the anti-Government elements or conduct forcible disarmament. Between June and September 2007, there was a sharp increase in standoff attacks, improvised explosive device incidents, mine attacks and assassinations, but a marked decrease in armed clashes. Since September, concerted efforts by the Ethiopian armed forces and the actions of the TFG against anti-Government elements within Mogadishu have increased. Of note is the fact that, during the last quarter of 2007, attacks by anti-Government elements became more coordinated and began to be conducted during daylight hours.

Security incidents occur almost daily, mostly by insurgents targeting TFG elements, as well as Ethiopian and AMISOM personnel. On 8 and 9 February 2008, the United Nations common compound was targeted by hand grenade and improvised explosive device attacks. Threats against the United Nations have also appeared on Islamist websites.

In summary, while the Transitional Federal Government has made some progress in its efforts to start an inclusive and viable peace process by reaching out to opposition groups, the security situation in many parts of Somalia, particularly in the capital of Mogadishu, remains complex, volatile and unpredictable. Due to the complexity of the conflict, shifting alliances and extremist activity, the situation in south and central Somalia can change daily, making any location that is safe one day potentially dangerous the next.

I would now like to refer to the contingency plans for a possible United Nations peacekeeping operation. Possible future developments are presented in the annex to the report before the Council under four scenarios, leading up to the possibility of deploying of a United Nations peacekeeping operation. Based on those scenarios, the Secretariat has further developed contingency plans on the support that could be provided by the international community to the peace process in Somalia.

Scenario 1 generally represents the current situation in Somalia. The TFG, with the support of national and international partners, continues to work on the development of an inclusive and viable political process, including by initiating dialogue. Meanwhile, the security situation remains volatile. Under this scenario, the current security situation does not allow for deployment of the United Nations Political Office for Somalia (UNPOS) and United Nations country team personnel in Mogadishu and the south and central parts of the country. However, the Department of Safety and Security (DSS), in consultation with the designated official, could develop viable options for security arrangements that would allow a limited number of UNPOS staff and United Nations country team members to relocate from Nairobi to Mogadishu and other parts of south and central Somalia. The relocation would enable the United Nations to effectively facilitate the mediation efforts on the ground and address critical gaps in humanitarian and recovery assistance.

The Security Council may also consider the establishment of a maritime task force, formalizing the unilateral initiatives presently being undertaken by individual Member States, either as a United Nations task force or as an international task force under a United Nations mandate. This contingency arrangement would also provide medical, logistic and in extremis support for United Nations personnel in Somalia.

Scenario 2 envisages a measured improvement in the political process, with at least a critical mass of the opposition parties supporting political dialogue. Under this scenario, while the security situation would still be volatile, dialogue on security arrangements would have commenced, creating the conditions necessary for strengthening the United Nations presence in Mogadishu and other areas of south and central Somalia.

The objective under the contingency plan in this scenario would be for the United Nations to further enhance its political support to the peace process through the relocation of UNPOS headquarters — in addition to the limited number of personnel initially deployed under scenario 1 — to Mogadishu in order to facilitate political dialogue on the ground. Subject to the presence required, security arrangements could take considerable time to put in place and entail a major investment in resources and physical protection measures. This further assessment will be undertaken by DSS during the month of April, in close consultation with the Department of Political Affairs, UNPOS, the Department of Field Support and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations.

Scenario 3 envisages a measured improvement in both the political and security situations and the acceptance and implementation by the major clans and factions, including a critical mass of armed opposition groups, of a code of conduct on the use of arms. While that may be short of a full security agreement — a ceasefire and/or the cessation of hostilities — it would establish a minimum code of behaviour among the armed groups, including a commitment not to attack United Nations and humanitarian personnel. The Ethiopian Government and the TFG would have indicated readiness to consider a phased withdrawal of Ethiopian troops from Mogadishu.

Under this scenario it is assumed that the political dialogue between the Government and the opposition would have commenced. But if the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops is to be achieved under this scenario — for example, before political and security agreements have been finalized — an impartial stabilization force formed by a coalition of willing States of about 8,000 highly trained and capable troops, together with police officers, would be required.

Under this scenario there would still be clan tensions, extremist elements and the potential for the resumption of conflict. The stabilization force would therefore require timely and accurate intelligence on extremist and other groups. The force would also need strong physical protection at its bases to defeat attacks by mortars and rocket-propelled grenades. Troops would need to apply tactical techniques to minimize their vulnerability to roadside bombs and should possess electronic countermeasures to defeat radio-controlled explosive devices.

A United Nations force could not be tasked with this role, as the vast majority of United Nations peacekeeping troops do not possess the those capabilities or training. As a result, the Security Council could consider this option only if offers were forthcoming from capable Member States ready to form a coalition of the willing under a strong lead nation, as proposed by Special Representative Ould Abdallah. The combined coalition stabilization force and AMISOM could allow the withdrawal of the Ethiopian armed forces from Mogadishu.

In scenario 4, a viable political process would have taken hold, involving players from southern and central Somalia and "Puntland", with the majority of the parties agreeing to a political power-sharing agreement and agreeing to renounce violence, lay down arms and commit to support the implementation of a Security Council mandate establishing an integrated United Nations peacekeeping operation. Although spoilers would still remain, they would have been marginalized to the extent possible. Under this scenario, the Ethiopian forces would have withdrawn or would be in the process of doing so. A military agreement would have been signed by the major clans and factions outlining key security arrangements, including a ceasefire.

A number of conditions would be required in order to ensure the best chances of success for an integrated United Nations peacekeeping mission in Somalia under this scenario. The strategic assessment and fact-finding missions further reviewed and refined those conditions with their counterparts on the ground, developing proposals for graduated interlinked political, security and programmatic assistance aimed at achieving an inclusive and stable political and peacebuilding process in Somalia. The conditions include the cessation of hostilities, agreement by all major groups to allow for external monitoring, and an inclusive political dialogue.

The United Nations military personnel who would be required for a United Nations peacekeeping operation in Somalia under this scenario number up to 27,000, with a possible police component of up to 1,500 police officers. Prior to the deployment of any mission, an integrated mission-planning process should be completed, including a comprehensive technical assessment mission to Somalia. The mission would, among other things, maintain a secure environment for the functioning of a broadly accepted political dispensation and assist in the development of security, judicial and corrections institutions capable of ensuring the rule of law and the administrative and institutional capacity necessary to provide basic and social services to the population.

Finally, with regard to support for AMISOM, on 20 February this year we received a letter from Chairperson Konaré of the African Union requesting that the United Nations put in place a financial, logistical and technical support package for AMISOM, totalling some $817,500,000. The Secretariat is reviewing that request to see how best the United Nations could respond to it. In the meantime, we encourage Member States to provide additional support to the African Union and to troop-contributing countries of AMISOM. In the meantime, the Secretariat continues to provide 10 planners to the African Union in Addis Ababa, who are supporting the planning for AMISOM.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I thank Mr. Mulet for his briefing.

I now call on the representative of Somalia.

Mr. Duale (Somalia): I would like to thank you, Mr. President, for taking the initiative to organize this public debate in the Security Council on the situation in Somalia. We also thank the Secretary-General and his Special Representative for their dedication to and tireless efforts for peace and stability in Somalia. Similarly, we thank the Department of Political Affairs and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. The Assistant Secretary-General has provided the Council with the details of a report that describes a very serious situation. We thank the missions for their report.

As mentioned, the Security Council was first seized of the situation in Somalia in early 1992. It devoted much energy to the Somali crisis at that time and adopted many resolutions. Those resolutions have allowed for the deployment of two peacekeeping operations and a multinational force.

However, after 16 years now, the Somali people are asking to be given a second chance to resolve the protracted tragedy in the country once and for all. We believe that this moment is no to time to give up. The people of Somalia are tired of civil war and suffering. The leadership of the Transitional Federal Government is committed to peace and national reconciliation, as stated by the Special Representative, and there is now a window of opportunity to be seized with the utmost urgency.

The United Nations, and the Security Council in particular, could benefit from valuable lessons learned from previous United Nations missions deployed in zones of civil wars and conflicts. In some cases, the United Nations has been able to send peacebuilding and peacekeeping missions that have made positive contributions to ending conflicts and building peace in affected countries. We hope, therefore, that the concerted action of the United Nations and the international community will contribute to peace, security and stabilization in Somalia after such a long time.

The report of the Secretary-General and the inter-agency fact-finding mission to Somalia (S/2008/178) clearly illustrates that the international community has a clear and unambiguous responsibility towards the people of Somalia. That responsibility obliges the Security Council to look beyond the limitations that the current security situation imposes and to reflect on a possible outcome and come up with ideas as to what is possible — within the constraints already mentioned in the paper by the Department of Peacekeeping Operations — to help create circumstances in which the United Nations can become more fully engaged. We are asking for real engagement by the United Nations and the Security Council.

The Security Council also has the responsibility to protect and assist the legitimate Government in Somalia as it does in other conflicts. Silence and lack of action are not viable options at this time. The international community in general, and the Security Council in particular, must participate in a serious manner in a peacebuilding process in Somalia. Such a process would send the right message to the Somali people, to subregional and regional organizations and to international donors. It would help strengthen the ongoing process of national reconciliation and thereby help support the efforts of the Transitional Federal Government of Somalia to achieve peace and reconciliation in the country.

While the Somali Government is striving to bring peace and stability to the country with limited resources and assistance from the international community, there are still a few elements — so-called spoilers — that are doing the opposite. We have taken note of the various ideas in the report, especially with regard to the proposed contingency plans and scenarios and the relocation of the United Nations agencies inside Somalia, which we welcome.

In our view, the most viable, practical and meaningful contingency plan and strategy is to adopt a timely and properly integrated contingency plan containing the four elements detailed in the report with the utmost urgency.

We also believe it is time for United Nations agencies to relocate inside Somalia, as was proposed, as soon as possible. There are many major cities in the country that can host and meet the security requirements of the United Nations agencies currently based in Nairobi. We wish also to emphasize the time factor, the need for urgent action and the importance of speeding up the whole process so that we avoid losing momentum and opportunities.

In conclusion, we have ample reasons to be positive and optimistic about the future as long as the international community speaks in one voice on the situation in Somalia under the leadership of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General. We very much hope that, this time, something tangible will come out of the deliberations of the Security Council. We wish to reiterate the firm commitment of my Government to do everything possible to move forward an inclusive dialogue and national reconciliation in the country in as timely of a manner as possible, with the leadership of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I now give the floor to the representative of Uganda.

Mr. Butagira (Uganda): The Ugandan delegation is grateful to you, Mr. President, for affording us this opportunity to take part in this important debate concerning the situation in Somalia. I would like to thank the Secretary-General for his latest report on Somalia, of 14 March 2008 (S/2008/178), which shows his continued interest in the matter and determination to find a solution to the problems plaguing Somalia.

The Security Council has been seized with the situation in Somalia for some time now. Indeed, resolution 1801 (2008), in its first preambular paragraph, recalls previous resolutions and presidential statements on this matter. In other words, the Council has long determined that the situation in Somalia constitutes and continues to constitute a threat to international peace and security in the region. It is for that reason that the Council authorized the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) to take all necessary measures, as appropriate for the maintenance of international peace and security, in Somalia. That mandate has been extended from time to time, the most recent instance being under resolution 1801 (2008), which extended the mandate for a further period of six months.

I want to stress here, however, that the maintenance of international peace and security is the primary responsibility of the Security Council, under Article 24 of the Charter of the United Nations. The Council may, however, as has been done under Chapter VIII of the Charter, authorize a regional organization to undertake that task on its behalf, and that is what it has done with AMISOM.

Allow me to point out, however, that that delegation of authority does not amount to abdication. That is why Uganda and many other countries have persistently called on the Security Council to assume its responsibility in Somalia, because AMISOM has a limited capacity thus far to handle the task. I would like to thank the Security Council for appreciating the important work that Ugandan forces have carried out in Somalia and our sustained commitment to supporting the efforts of AMISOM. I would like to reaffirm the commitment of Uganda in that regard. Allow me to now address two issues.

First, only Uganda and Burundi have deployed troops in Somalia to date. Other countries that have pledged troops have not fulfilled their pledges. We have called on the international community to provide the necessary logistical and financial support, and we thank the countries that have helped, such as the United States, but so far not much has been done. The Security Council, in resolution 1801 (2008), has urged Member States to provide financial resources, personnel, equipment and services for the full deployment of AMISOM. It is our belief, however, that the Security Council should take a proactive lead in that exercise by mobilizing the necessary resources, including finances and other logistics.

Secondly, we have urged the Security Council to take over from AMISOM. Sadly, nothing has been done. We are now familiar with the phrase "development of contingency plans for the possible deployment of a United Nations peacekeeping operation to succeed AMISOM". That was set out in resolution 1772 (2007); in the presidential statement of 19 December 2007 (S/PRST/2007/49); and now in paragraph 6 of resolution 1801 (2008). The question is: when shall we move from the realm of possibility to that of actuality? We note that from paragraph 40 of the report of the Secretary-General that, this time around, he is proposing, under one of the various scenarios, the deployment of United Nations peacekeepers, subject to certain conditions first being fulfilled. In fact, we think that all the scenarios should be considered and not be mutually exclusive. It is pertinent to quote paragraph 40:

> "Under scenario 4, a United Nations peacekeeping operation for Somalia would be deployed, provided that broad-based political and security agreements are in place. Prior to the deployment of a United Nations peacekeeping operation, political agreements reached and security commitments made should include general provisions on power-sharing, the laying-down of arms, respect for human rights, facilitation of humanitarian assistance and the development of governing institutions. A total force of from 15 to 21 infantry battalions would be required. The total number of United Nations military could number up to 27,000, with a possible police component of up to 1,500 police officers."

But it is apparent from that that no peacekeepers will be deployed unless there is peace to keep in Somalia in the first place. The conditions outlined are important and everything should be done to achieve them, but they should not be preconditions, in our view. I have had occasion to tell the Security Council and the General Assembly that in fact there may be instances — and Somalia is one — when the Security Council should engage in peacemaking as well. Indeed, we are not persuaded by the reasoning as contained in the report. If there was no peace to keep, why then did the Security Council authorize AMISOM, which was in fact acting on its behalf.

It is not my wish to draw parallels here, but I would like to cite the example of Darfur. No one can say for sure that there is peace to keep in Darfur, and yet the United Nations has authorized the deployment of United Nations peacekeepers in Darfur. We should avoid giving an impression of double standards.

To conclude, therefore, Uganda urges the Security Council to do the following: to move quickly to mobilize the international community, with the United Nations taking the lead, to provide the necessary logistical and financial support to AMISOM to fully deploy in Somalia. In that regard, Uganda calls on the Secretary-General to respond favourably to the proposal by the Chairperson of the African Union, in his letter of 20 February 2008, for a financial, logistical and technical support package.

It is our conviction that the full deployment of AMISOM will serve as a stabilization force pending the arrival of United Nations peacekeepers; indeed, it should be the nucleus for the planned United Nations force.

Secondly, there is a need to finalize plans and move quickly towards the deployment of the United Nations peacekeeping force to take over from AMISOM without preconditions.

Uganda is in Somalia for a good cause and we shall stay the course, for we believe the international community should not abandon Somalia.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): There are no further speakers inscribed on my list. In accordance with the understanding reached in the course of the Council's prior consultations, I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion of the subject.

The meeting rose at 11.20 a.m.

United Nations S/PV.5859

Security Council

Sixty-third year

Provisional

5859th meeting

Tuesday, 25 March 2008, 10 a.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Churkin	(Russian Federation)
Members:	Belgium	Mr. Verbeke
	Burkina Faso	Mr. Kafando
	China	Mr. Liu Zhenmin
	Costa Rica	Mr. Urbina
	Croatia	Mr. Jurica
	France	Mr. Ripert
	Indonesia	Mr. Natalegawa
	Italy	Mr. Spatafora
	Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	Mr. Ettalhi
	Panama	Mr. Arias
	South Africa	Mr. Kumalo
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Sir John Sawers
	United States of America	Mr. Khalilzad
	Viet Nam	Mr. Le Luong Minh

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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08-28218 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I should like to inform the Council that I have received letters from the representatives of Cuba, Israel, Lebanon, Pakistan, Slovenia, the Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic in which they request to be invited to participate in the consideration of the item on the Council's agenda. In conformity with the usual practice, I propose, with the consent of the Council, to invite those representatives to participate in the consideration of the item, without the right to vote, in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Charter and rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

At the invitation of the President, Mr. Gillerman (Israel) took a seat at the Council table; the representatives of the other aforementioned countries took the seats reserved for them at the side of the Council Chamber.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I should like to inform the Council that I have received a letter dated 19 March 2008 from the Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations, which will be issued as document S/2008/184 and which reads as follows:

> "I have the honour to request that, in accordance with its previous practice, the Security Council invite the Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations to participate in the meeting of the Security Council which will be held on Tuesday, 25 March 2008, regarding the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question."

I propose, with the consent of the Council, to invite the Permanent Observer of Palestine to participate in the meeting, in accordance with the provisional rules of procedure and previous practice in this regard.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

At the invitation of the President, Mr. Mansour (Palestine) took a seat at the Council table.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I welcome the presence of the Secretary-General, His Excellency Mr. Ban Ki-moon, at this meeting and give him the floor.

The Secretary-General: I am grateful for this opportunity to address the Council on what is undoubtedly one of the most important items on its agenda and on mine: the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question.

Three weeks ago, I briefed you on the tragic developments then under way in Gaza and southern Israel. While I am glad that the violence has abated somewhat since then, tensions remain high. I am deeply concerned about the prospect of renewed violence and what that would mean for both the civilian populations in the conflict zone and for the peace process we are all trying to advance.

Despite many difficulties on the ground, difficulties that must be addressed, I commend the commitment of President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert to the political process. I am personally and profoundly committed to supporting this process in every way I can and I admire both leaders for their tenacity in the face of much scepticism.

Let us remember that negotiations are the only means to achieve the legitimate Palestinian aspirations to an end to occupation and independent sovereign statehood and legitimate Israeli aspirations for sustainable security and an end to conflict.

At Annapolis, the international community bore witness and expressed its support as Israeli and Palestinian leaders set themselves the target of reaching an agreement by the end of the year. It is my hope that we can achieve this ambitious goal. I believe that all of us must ask ourselves and the parties two simple questions. If not this, what? If not now, when?

This process is too important to be allowed to lose momentum through inaction or indifference, or to be overwhelmed by violence. It is essential that it receive the support of the international community, including this Council.

I remain personally determined and committed to working towards peace within the framework agreed upon: an end to the occupation that began in 1967, based on the foundations of the Madrid Conference, the principle of land for peace, Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002) and

1515 (2003) and the Arab Peace Initiative. This framework will lead to an end of conflict, the creation of a Palestinian State, living side by side in peace and security with Israel, and a comprehensive regional peace. I assure the Council that my senior advisers and myself are making unceasing efforts to press forward this agenda in all contacts and forums available to us, including dialogue with the parties and the regional parties, the Quartet and, of course, this Council itself.

Mr. Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, will now report on the developments that have taken place over the past month.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

It is so decided.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

The Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

I now give the floor to Mr. Pascoe.

Mr. Pascoe: Since the last monthly briefing to the Security Council, I regret that the continuing efforts to advance the political process were once again overshadowed by violence, high numbers of civilian casualties and a lack of concrete improvements on the ground.

The reporting period saw major escalations in violence, with a heavy Israeli air and land military assault in Gaza; the firing of rockets and mortars at Israel — over 390 during the reporting period — including the use this month of longer-range rockets; an attack on a Jewish school in West Jerusalem; Israel Defense Forces (IDF) operations throughout the West Bank targeting alleged militants; and clashes between the IDF and protesting Palestinians in West Bank cities, including in East Jerusalem. In total, 124 Palestinians, including 36 children, were killed in IDF operations, and 359 were injured. Thirteen Israelis, including 4 children, were killed by Palestinian militants, and 55 were injured. Tensions remain high, despite an observable reduction in violence in and around Gaza in the past few weeks.

The Council will recall that when it met in emergency session on 1 March, the violence in and around Gaza was at its height. IDF operation Hot Winter lasted five days and caused dozens of civilian casualties, including the deaths of 31 children, while Hamas rocket attacks extended as far as the Israeli city of Ashkelon, bringing nearly a quarter of a million Israeli civilians within rocket range of Gaza. The Secretary-General condemned the excessive and disproportionate use of force and the killing of civilians and also condemned indiscriminate rocket fire and called for an immediate cessation of such rocket attacks. We reiterate that all parties must comply with international humanitarian law. Regrettably, no party has conducted law-based, independent, transparent and accessible investigations into the killings of civilians and other human rights violations, made the findings public and held perpetrators accountable, as called for by the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Since that briefing, violence has also spread to Jerusalem and the West Bank. On 2 March, a Palestinian child was shot and killed by the IDF during a protest against the situation in Gaza. On 6 March, eight Israeli students, including four children, were killed in a savage shooting attack at a Jewish seminary in West Jerusalem by a Palestinian from East Jerusalem. That was the first major attack in Jerusalem in almost four years and was strongly condemned by the Secretary-General. On 16 March, dozens of Israelis rioted in the neighbourhood of the killer's home in East Jerusalem. The stabbing of an Israeli in the Old City on 18 March further contributed to the tense atmosphere.

During the reporting period, IDF incursions took place in several West Bank towns, resulting in the arrests of dozens of Palestinians for alleged militant activity. In two separate incidents targeting Islamic Jihad on 12 March, four militants were killed in Bethlehem and another militant was killed in Tulkarem. These incidents were followed by a barrage of rockets fired by Islamic Jihad from Gaza into southern Israel.

We support Egyptian efforts to bring about a cessation of violence, particularly in Gaza, and to facilitate a gradual reopening of crossings into Gaza in coordination with the parties. In this regard, we have taken note of the recent reduction in violence in and around Gaza and the more regular import of supplies across the crossings. That is a positive but extremely fragile development. We are acutely conscious of the potential for even more deadly episodes of violence to occur very quickly and of the danger that that poses for the security of the Palestinians, Israel and Egypt and for the political process. We urge all parties to act with a sense of responsibility and to cooperate with the Egyptian efforts. We also welcome Egyptian efforts to complete construction of a new border boundary. We encourage intensified cooperation among relevant parties to ensure that legitimate traffic into and out of Gaza at all crossing points takes place, and that concerns regarding alleged smuggling are addressed.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza remains of grave concern, although there has been an improvement in the volume of goods entering the Strip. In the past month, over 1,400 trucks have crossed into Gaza, 95 per cent of them carrying commercial supplies of basic items. That is an improvement from previous months, and we hope for further easing in the near future. Fuel imports have continued to enter from Israel, although shortages remain in key sectors such as health. On any given day between 30 and 50 per cent of ambulances cannot be used due to lack of fuel. Sanitation authorities continue to dump 60,000 cubic metres of raw and partially treated sewage into the sea each day as a result of fuel, electrical and spare parts shortages. Fuel shortages have prevented 63 per cent of Gaza's regular fishing trips, further exacerbating what is already a dire socio-economic scenario. Food insecurity is increasing as salaries dry up, and at least 50,000 additional beneficiaries have been added to food assistance distribution lists.

We also note that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has still not gained access to captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, and that one of the more than 10,000 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails died earlier this month, bringing the number of Palestinian prisoners who have died in Israeli prisons to seven since the beginning of 2007.

In the West Bank, 580 IDF-imposed obstacles continue to block Palestinian movement. The levels of restrictions, in both quantity and character, have steadily increased each year since 2005, and are at the root of Palestinian economic decline. The restrictions have continued despite the security efforts of the Palestinian Authority since mid-2007. Recent International Monetary Fund (IMF) projections show that under current conditions gross domestic product (GDP) growth in 2008 will not exceed population growth. Action to ease closure inside the West Bank is essential if a viable Palestinian economy is to develop as the basis for a viable Palestinian State.

In addition to restrictions on Palestinian movement, restrictions of movement of United Nations staff in the West Bank and between the West Bank and East Jerusalem also continue to increase, making delivery of programmes increasingly difficult.

Israeli settlement activity has continued in the reporting period in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Tenders and construction permits for hundreds of housing units were announced this month, and construction continues in many settlements as well as on infrastructure such as roads for settler use. The Israeli Government stated publicly that settlement expansion in East Jerusalem will continue.

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) has raised concerns about Israeli archaeological excavations in the Palestinian neighbourhood of Silwan in East Jerusalem, bordering the Haram Al-Sharif/Temple Mount. The PLO raised additional concerns about alleged plans to bring more Israeli settlers to Ras al-Amud in East Jerusalem while transferring Israeli police personnel to the police station constructed at the centre of the proposed E-1 settlement area between Israel and the settlement of Ma'ale Adumim to the east.

All settlement activity in East Jerusalem or elsewhere in the West Bank is contrary to international law and Security Council resolutions. Israel's failure to cease settlement activity including natural growth or to dismantle the outposts erected after March 2001 is contrary to the Road Map. The Secretary-General has made public his concerns that urgent action must be taken on this issue.

Construction work on the barrier continues within occupied Palestinian territory, in deviation from the Green Line and contrary to the International Court of Justice advisory opinion. Meanwhile, the number of house demolitions in the West Bank has increased noticeably. Since the beginning of this year, over 100 structures — at least half of them residential — have been demolished, displacing nearly 400 Palestinians.

There is little I am able to report about the state of bilateral negotiations. This is a positive reflection of the confidentiality that is being maintained, enabling Israeli and Palestinian leaders to be candid in their discussions. As a result of the significant Palestinian casualties in Gaza, Palestinian President Abbas suspended bilateral negotiations with Israel for a period.

However, meetings between the heads of the two negotiating teams resumed recently and the work of a number of technical groups formed between the parties is being pursued. Palestinian Prime Minister Fayyad and a senior official in the Israeli Ministry of Defence also attended the first trilateral meeting on monitoring of the implementation of Phase 1 Road Map commitments, hosted by the United States Lieutenant General Fraser.

We support the continuing reform efforts of the Government of Prime Minister Fayyad. A recent IMF mission confirmed that, despite the difficult environment, impressive financial reform measures have been taken, including the reestablishment of cash control procedures and a new accounting system for fiscal reporting.

The Palestinian Development Plan is still being finalized and will shortly be shared with the international community in order to enlist support. The financing needs for recurrent costs in 2008 stand at $1.7 billion. So far, $1.2 billion have been pledged, and about half of the pledges will be disbursed by the end of March. Hence, there is a shortfall of $500 million for recurrent expenditure.

A meeting of the co-chairs of the Paris donors' conference, Foreign Minister Kouchner of France, Commissioner Ferrero Waldner of the European Commission, Foreign Minister Støhre of Norway and Quartet Representative Tony Blair, took place today to assess the situation since the Paris Conference. The next meeting of the Ad-Hoc Liaison Committee will take place on 2 May in London hosted by the United Kingdom and Norway.

Efforts to reform, train and equip the Palestinian security forces in the West Bank continued during the reporting period. Some 1000 officers are currently being trained in Jordan, with the support of the United States Security Coordinator, for deployment in the West Bank in April and May. President Abbas issued a decree aimed at reforming the Palestinian Authority intelligence apparatus. The Interior Minister has submitted a comprehensive report about security in the West Bank. Palestinian security forces have undertaken operations disarming and arresting militants in the West Bank.

However, there is more work to do for the Palestinian Authority to reassert law and order across the cities of the West Bank and meet its Road Map obligations to effectively combat terrorism. If these obligations are to be met, greater Israeli-Palestinian Authority security cooperation is essential.

The Quartet continues to be in close contact at the principal and envoy levels. There are ongoing discussions over the idea of a renewed international meeting in Moscow in the coming period. We are supportive of the idea of such a meeting.

We also continue to stress the vital role of Arab States in support of the peace process, the central importance of the Arab Peace Initiative and the ultimate need for a comprehensive regional peace. Foreign Ministers from the League of Arab States met in Cairo on 5 March ahead of the annual summit planned for 29-30 March in Damascus.

We note their support for the seven-point plan announced by Yemeni President Saleh, calling for a return of the situation in Gaza to the situation before the Hamas takeover in last June, the holding of early elections and a resumption of dialogue on the basis of previous internal Palestinian agreements.

Fatah and Hamas representatives reportedly held constructive discussions on the plan in Sana'a. As a matter of principle, we believe that the unity of the legitimate Palestinian Authority must be restored through peaceful means in support of the political process for a peacefully negotiated two-State solution, and we believe that Arab countries have a leading role to play in supporting such efforts.

The situation in the occupied Syrian Golan has remained quiet over the reporting period, although settlement activity continues.

Lebanon continues in the grip of a deep political crisis. Yesterday, the parliamentary session to elect a President was postponed for the seventeenth time since 24 November 2007.

The Secretary-General firmly supports the Arab League initiative and encourages the parties to facilitate its implementation. The longer the stalemate continues, the greater the chance for the situation to deteriorate further, both politically and in terms of the security situation.

While the general security atmosphere has remained relatively calm with no major incidents, public tension and anxiety increased during the reporting period. On 16 February, in Beirut, clashes broke out between supporters of various groups affiliated with the majority and the opposition, leaving 20 people injured.

Officials from both sides involved have pledged to cooperate with the Lebanese Armed Forces to avoid the recurrence of such confrontations. Clashes between Fatah and Jund al-Sham erupted on 21 March in the Palestinian refugee camp of Ein el-Hilweh in southern Lebanon leading to one fatality.

The situation within the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) area of operations has remained quiet, although with increased levels of tension. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have been on a heightened state of alert along the Blue Line since the assassination of Imad Mughniyah on 12 February, and the Lebanese Armed Forces have announced the introduction of specific measures and additional deployment of forces in the event of an attack.

Over the same time period, there has been a considerable increase of IDF violations of Lebanese airspace, with 222 such violations being reported by UNIFIL over a one-week period alone, that is, from 11 to 17 March. These violations constitute a serious breach of Lebanese sovereignty and the Blue Line and undermine the credibility of Lebanese national institutions and UNIFIL.

A UNIFIL investigation also is ongoing into an alleged breach of Lebanese territorial waters. Despite the general increase in tension, all parties have reassured UNIFIL that they do not seek a renewal of hostilities.

With regard to the Palestinian camp of Nahr el-Bared, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), in cooperation with the Lebanese Army and the office of the Prime Minister, has finalized the Master Plan for the reconstruction of the camp. The reconstruction effort will be a long and complex undertaking that will require the full support of the international donor community.

The fact that the political process between Israelis and Palestinians is continuing is extremely important given the many negative developments that threaten to derail it. The process can only be sustained by much more meaningful efforts to implement Phase 1 of the Road Map and to improve economic and security conditions. The international community and all regional parties should also give strong support to efforts to bring about a cessation of violence in and around Gaza and a reopening of crossings in an atmosphere in which the security concerns of Palestinians, Israel and Egypt are addressed. Otherwise, the potential for further violence is all too real, with grave consequences for civilians, for regional peace and security, and for the political process itself.

The Secretary-General remains committed to supporting all efforts to secure, through negotiations, the full implementation of the Security Council resolutions on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I thank Mr. Pascoe for his briefing.

In accordance with the understanding reached among Council members, I wish to remind all speakers to limit their statements to no more than five minutes in order to enable the Council to carry out its work expeditiously. Delegations with lengthy statements are kindly requested to circulate their text in writing and to deliver a condensed version when speaking in the Chamber.

I now give the floor to the Permanent Observer of Palestine.

Mr. Mansour (Palestine): I would like to start by expressing our gratitude and thanks to the Secretary-General for his participation with us today, for his statement and, above all, for his commitment to doing all he can to end the Israeli occupation begun in 1967 and to allow the two-State solution to see the light of day on the well-known bases he enumerated. Palestine will continue to cooperate with him and with the Security Council to that end.

I would also like to thank Mr. Pascoe for his statement and for the recommendations and conclusions contained therein.

(*spoke in Arabic*)

Once again, I am compelled to convey to the Security Council the recent negative and grave developments in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, as a result of the illegal and destructive policies of Israel, the occupying Power. Instead of advancing towards the consolidation of the foundations of a just, permanent and comprehensive peace leading to the conclusion of a peace agreement that paves the way to the establishment of an independent, sovereign, contiguous and viable Palestinian State on the basis of the 1967 borders by the end of this year, the Israeli Government continues deliberately to undermine the simplest achievements made in the interests of peace.

Israel continues to pursue its illegal policies aimed at entrenching its occupation and colonization of the Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, inter alia through illegal settlement activities, the construction of the wall, the confiscation of land, the imposition of a suffocating siege and collective punishment, brutal military aggression and countless other crimes committed by the Israeli occupying forces and fanatical Israeli settlers against the Palestinian civilian population.

Particularly over the past few weeks, the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, has witnessed grave developments and a further deterioration and destabilization of the situation, which require the immediate attention of the Security Council. Among those developments have been brutal crimes committed by the occupying forces against Palestinian civilians, including children, particularly in the Gaza Strip, and announcements by the Israeli Government of ongoing plans to expand illegal settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory, especially in and around East Jerusalem.

With regard to the Gaza Strip in particular, following threats made by several Israeli officials to launch large-scale military attacks against the Palestinian people under occupation in the Gaza Strip, including the threat made by the Deputy Defense Minister of Israel to inflict a "holocaust" on the Palestinian population in Gaza, the Israeli occupying forces launched a barbaric military aggression against civilian areas in the northern Gaza Strip on 27 February 2008. The raids and attacks resulted in the deaths of more than 120 Palestinian martyrs, most of them innocent civilians inside their own homes, including more than 25 children and infants and 10 women, and the wounding of more than 300 other civilians. That vicious military campaign lasted for four days, during which Israel used all types of heavy and lethal weaponry to bombard densely populated civilian areas by air, sea and land, causing massive bloodshed and the widespread destruction of public and private property and infrastructure.

Despite the warnings of international bodies and humanitarian organizations of the precarious situation in the Gaza Strip; despite our continuous warnings through successive letters and statements to the Security Council; and despite the appeal made by the Council to the parties to respect their obligations under international law following the emergency meeting of the Council of 1 March 2008, Israel pursued its military campaign in total disregard for all international appeals. In that respect, we must stress the negative ramifications of the Council's inability to adopt a resolution clearly condemning Israel's acts of aggression and calling upon it to cease its flagrant violations of international law, including human rights law and particularly the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which stresses the need to take all necessary and possible measures to ensure the protection of children in armed conflict, as well as international humanitarian law, which, inter alia, in article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, prohibits reprisals against civilians and the imposition of collective punishment on civilian populations.

The pursuit of those attacks deepened the suffering of a people that is already enduring extremely difficult and miserable living conditions as a result of the suffocating siege imposed for many months now by the occupying Power on the Gaza Strip and the ensuing humanitarian and environmental disaster being inflicted upon it.

Those crimes have been continuously justified by Israel, the occupying Power, under the pretexts of security, the right to self-defence and counter-terrorism. In that regard, we reiterate our previously stated position that nothing justifies the killing of children. When the slaughter of innocent children has become acceptable or is somehow sought to be justified under any pretext, we know that we have fully sunk into a dark abyss characterized by the total absence of law, logic, reason, morality, conscience and humanity. When we fail to stand against such brutal and heinous crimes, we bitterly come to understand that the standards of law and human rights are not applicable equally to all human beings, including children, women, the elderly and the disabled. That perception is dangerously rife among the Palestinian people, who have endured the killing of more than 1,000 children by the Israeli occupying forces since 2000 under the pretext of security.

In that context, it must be stated that security, freedom and basic standards of living are the rights of all peoples without discrimination and are not exclusive to any religion, race, colour or ethnicity. Like all the other peoples of the world, the Palestinian people — its children, women, young people and men — have the right to life and to enjoy prosperity, security and safety. Moreover, they have the right to live in freedom and dignity in their own land, the land of their forefathers, following an occupation that has lasted for more than 40 years and 60 years of exile in refugee camps and diaspora. In accordance with the norms of international law and norms, the Palestinian people also have the right to international protection.

In conformity with the Charter of the United Nations, peace and security are to be achieved through effective collective measures to prevent and eradicate threats to peace and to suppress acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace. We therefore reaffirm the fact that peace and security in our region will be achieved only with the end of Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory. That requires serious steps that will lead to the end of the occupation in all its aspects and make it possible for the Palestinian people to exercise their right to self-determination on the basis of the principle of the equality of the rights of all peoples as enshrined in the Charter.

The hollow security pretext that Israel, the occupying Power, constantly uses and exploits while virtually ignoring its very role as an occupying Power can be summed up in its ongoing pursuit of efforts intended to prolong the occupation and to conceal the expansion of its colonialist settlements and its confiscation of more Palestinian land. What sort of security does Israel hope to achieve by continuing its occupation and colonization of Palestinian land? What kind of security does Israel want to achieve by transforming the land into isolated ghettos, cantons and large prisons?

Israel, the occupying Power, is relentlessly continuing to carry out colonial settlement activities. It is also continuing to build its illegal wall on occupied Palestinian territory, including in and around East Jerusalem. That is a grave and flagrant violation of international law, including the Fourth Geneva Convention, as well as of United Nations resolutions and the advisory opinion issued by the International Court of Justice on 9 July 2004. It is also a violation of its obligations under the Road Map.

In that regard, and in the context of its attempts to create massive physical facts on the ground, immediately following the convening of the Annapolis Conference and the resumption of the peace process, in November 2007, Israel announced the continuation of its illegal expansionist plans to build at least 2,000 new settlement units in occupied East Jerusalem, thereby furthering its illegal efforts to change the character, status and demographic composition of the Holy City and to judaize it. The Israeli Housing Ministry's budget for 2008 includes financing for the building of 500 settlement units in Jebel Abu Ghneim and another 240 units in the Ma'ale Adumim, to the east of Jerusalem. Just two weeks ago, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert announced the approval of the construction of an additional 750 new units in the Geevat Ze'ev settlement, north of East Jerusalem. Plans were also announced for the construction of 400 new settlement units in the Neve Yacub neighbourhood of occupied East Jerusalem. Moreover, the Israeli Prime Minister publicly declared recently that Israel would not stop building settlements on occupied Palestinian territory, especially in East Jerusalem. That is a grave breach of international law that defies the will of the international community and undermines the efforts to revive the peace process.

In reality, the illegal settlement campaign and the peace process clearly cannot coexist. The peace process cannot be separated from the situation on the ground, because all of those actions endanger the continuation of the entire peace process and create even more physical obstructions that must be contended with on the road to achieving a just and lasting peace settlement. They also undermine the future prospects for achieving the two-State solution of Israel and Palestine living side by side in peace and security on the basis of the 1967 borders. That physical affront to the two-State solution has been affirmed by several international bodies and organizations, including in reports regarding the negative and dangerous impact of ongoing settlement colonization on the future of the peace process. In that regard, the July 2007 report of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) included alarming facts indicating that more than 38 per cent of the area of the West Bank is now occupied by settlements, outposts, military bases, roads and other infrastructure forbidden to Palestinians.

Such successive ongoing illegal measures by Israel, the occupying Power, and the timing of those measures are clearly and intricately correlated — whether they be the intensification of settlement activities in East Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank, the deliberate repeated attempts by Israel to sabotage security efforts by the Palestinian Authority, the increase, rather than the removal, of checkpoints and roadblocks and the continuation and intensification of its siege of the Gaza Strip and the ongoing aggression against it to isolate it from the West Bank. In addition to the extreme suffering caused to the Palestinian people, all of those actions undermine the role of the Palestinian Authority and damage the peace process, raising serious doubts regarding Israel's intentions and good faith in negotiations while it continues to pursue its illegal and destructive actions and measures.

The killing of Palestinian civilians, the destruction of their properties and infrastructure, the imprisonment of thousands of civilians, the collective punishment, the starvation, the humiliation, the intimidation, the colonization and the other mass violations of human rights are in compatible with peace. They serve to dash hopes and impair the peace process, draining its momentum and credibility. They also severely worsen the situation on the ground, which is already critical at all levels, thereby fuelling the cycle of violence and instability and exclusively serving the agendas of extremists and pushing peace further out of reach. Those violations must be brought to an end. The occupying Power must be held accountable for its crimes and violations and be compelled to abide by all of its legal obligations.

In the light of all of those serious developments, it is incumbent upon the international community, particularly the Security Council, to uphold its responsibilities and take the necessary measures to bring an end to all of those grave Israeli violations and breaches of international law. That includes humanitarian law, and in particular the Fourth Geneva Convention, as well as human rights law and United Nations resolutions. The Council must take urgent and practical measures, including, inter alia, measures prescribed by the Charter, to ensure Israel's scrupulous compliance with all of its obligations under international law and the cessation of its illegal practices, which endanger the international efforts being made to achieve peace through the peace process.

Israel, the occupying Power, should be compelled to completely freeze all of its settlement activities, to rescind its recent decisions, to start dismantling settlement outposts and to take further confidence-building measures to show its seriousness with regard to addressing this critical issue. Such steps are vital to calming and improving the atmosphere, reviving momentum and helping to advance the peace process towards its stated goals.

Moreover, the failure of the Security Council to uphold its responsibilities with regard to the deteriorating and tragic humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territory will only encourage the occupying Power to continue its violations of international law, to continue committing crimes against the Palestinian people with impunity and to continue undermining the fragile peace process in the region. The international community cannot continue to allow the incarceration and suffocation of the entirety of the Palestinian civilian population in the Gaza Strip under the occupying Power's siege. Israel must be compelled to allow for the opening of the Gaza border crossings to permit the movement of persons and goods, including foodstuffs, medical supplies, building materials and other necessary goods, and the unfettered access of the urgently needed humanitarian assistance and personnel to Gaza. In this regard, we reiterate the readiness of the Palestinian Authority to assume responsibility for the Palestine side of the Gaza Strip's border crossings, and we call on Israel to act on that initiative.

The current situation in the Gaza Strip is a human catastrophe, and we cannot remain silent about it. Immediate action must be taken to lift the siege and closure and allow for the movement of persons and goods in order to alleviate the suffering of the civilian population at all levels and in all sectors and to improve conditions on the ground. Such measures are imperative not only from a humanitarian aspect, they are also imperative from a peace aspect, for no one can expect a people enduring such inhumane and oppressive conditions to even entertain hopes for peace, much less believe in the prospects for peace.

We reiterate that we will continue to resort to the Security Council until it assumes its responsibilities. We will also continue to resort to other organs of the United Nations, including the General Assembly, and other international forums in order to bring an end to the violations and crimes being committed by Israel against the Palestinian people and their inalienable rights, foremost of which are the right to life, the right to self-determination, the right of refugees to return and to find a just solution to their plight in consonance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III), and the right to establish the independent State of Palestine, with its East Jerusalem as its capital — without which there can be no peaceful solution, as Jerusalem is the heart of Palestine.

The road to security passes through the gate of justice and peace. There is no military solution to this conflict. Violence only begets violence, and the continuation of occupation and colonization will ultimately impede any real prospects for realizing a peaceful, just and permanent solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the Arab-Israeli conflict as a whole.

We reaffirm that the attempts to determine the future of our people in the context of cantons and ghettos in a West Bank fragmented by settlements, the Wall, checkpoints and roadblocks, and of the siege of the Gaza Strip and acts of aggression will totally obstruct the attainment of the goal we all strive to achieve — a just, comprehensive and lasting peace.

In conclusion, I reiterate what President Mahmoud Abbas has repeatedly stated: there is a Palestinian partner ready to sit at the negotiating table with a serious Israeli partner to reach a solution based on the resolutions of international legitimacy, the Arab Peace Initiative and the Road Map. We seek a just and permanent solution guaranteeing the flourishing of peace, not a partial, unilateral or temporary solution that will actually prevent the realization of peace in our region. We assure the international community as a whole that we believe in right over might. We remain resolved to protect our rights and to promote our desire for peace. We appeal again to the international community to do its part to help us achieve peace in the Holy Land — peace in the land of peace.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I now give the floor to the representative of Israel.

Mr. Gillerman (Israel): At the outset, allow me to congratulate you, Mr. President, on your very able stewardship of the Council this month and to thank you for your principled leadership. We are also grateful to the Secretary-General for honouring us with his presence at the opening of this meeting and for his commitment to resolving this issue. I also wish to thank Under-Secretary-General Pascoe for his briefing.

On this note, I just want to make clear that Israel never has acted, and does not act, against so-called alleged militants but against internationally declared and recognized terrorists. I certainly hope the term "alleged militants" is not the United Nations' new definition of terrorism.

The struggle of the moderates against the extremists, which is raging around the world, is the defining challenge of our day. Across the globe, forces of extremism seek to transform resolvable political conflicts into endless religious wars, using all means of violence at their disposal. They fight not for their own rights, but to deprive others of their rights. In our region, Iran — a notorious State sponsor of terrorism — uses proxies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas among the Palestinians to draw the moderates into a cosmic battle, where victory is not about achievement but about total annihilation.

The very ideology of the extremists makes a dialogue with them impossible. That is why Israel, along with other, like-minded States, understands that dealing with extremists is indeed a zero-sum equation. In contrast, negotiations with the moderates, as Israel is doing with a moderate Palestinian Authority leadership that renounces terrorism and violence, can yield great benefit for both parties. I sincerely want to believe that my esteemed Palestinian colleague does represent the moderates, in spite of the very distorted picture he felt compelled to draw today.

As we have seen, the extremists will do everything to break the coalition of moderates and destroy all prospects for peace. During the last month alone, Hamas fired more than 300 rockets at Israel, at least 23 of them Iranian-made Grad missiles that hit the city of Ashkelon, a quaint coastal city with a population of 120,000. The rocket attacks marked an escalation of violence not just in number, but also in weaponry. Grad rockets — smuggled into the Gaza Strip from Iran during the breach of the Gaza border this January — have greater range and larger warheads, and they fragment on impact. Hamas' new weapon of choice means that a quarter of a million Israeli civilians now live in constant danger of rocket fire. We can all thank Iran for adding another weapon to the Hamas arsenal, in addition to its already heinous suicide attacks and deadly Qassam rockets.

Hamas and its terrorist-State backers bear sole responsibility for the escalation of violence. The Secretary-General rightfully told the Council at the meeting held earlier this, month, "I condemn Palestinian rocket attacks and call for the immediate cessation of such acts of terrorism, which serve no purpose, endanger Israeli civilians and bring misery to the Palestinian people" (*S/PV.5847, p. 3*). Indeed, it is terrorism — plain and simple.

As Hamas unleashed its terrorism on the civilians of Ashkelon, it continued to wreak havoc and daily terror on the people of Sderot — a small but resilient city of 23,000 people where children no longer run around on playgrounds; they now run to bomb shelters. Such is the reality in Sderot, where 15 seconds is all you have to find safety before a Qassam rocket comes crashing down on you.

Though some wish to refer to the apparent lull in Hamas rocket attacks, I must warn that the perceived quiet is only on the surface. The bombs keep ticking, albeit quietly. The rockets out of Gaza have not stopped. Hamas is using this time to smuggle in and produce more rockets. Building rockets is not quiet. It is a silent promise — a promise of what is to come next: more terror and more violence, more extremism and more bloodshed.

In fact, we have seen the great lengths that the extremists are willing to go to in order to kill and maim Israelis. Just over two weeks ago, a Palestinian terrorist infiltrated the Mercaz HaRav rabbinical seminary in Jerusalem and ruthlessly gunned down eight young men, who were studying the Bible in the upstairs library. Eleven others were injured, many of whom remain in serious condition. The terrorist chose his target carefully; Mercaz HaRav is one of Israel's most revered institutions of Zionism and Jewish learning, and it is situated in the heart of Jerusalem, steps away from the seat of the Israeli Government and our most cherished democratic institutions.

As medical and rescue teams rushed to the scene, as the Israeli public heard the news of this appalling massacre, and as mothers and fathers were called to retrieve the remains of their slaughtered sons, the extremists in Gaza rejoiced at the spilling of Israeli blood. I am sure that many in this Council watched with horror and disgust as Hamas terrorists joyfully fired their rifles into the air and passed out candy to children in celebration. If anyone doubted what the extremists stand for, the reaction in Gaza to the murder of eight Israeli boys sets the record straight. It was also a stark reminder that those were the same people who danced on the rooftops after 9/11.

That is why it was so sad and disturbing that the Council could not condemn the terrorist attack, particularly in spite of your own very valiant efforts, Mr. President, and those of many other distinguished ambassadors on the Council. The Security Council has a longstanding practice of condemning terrorism, no matter the victims, no matter the location, no matter the perpetrator and no matter the motivation. Yet the Council could not unanimously condemn that terrorist attack and intentional killing of civilians, for the Council was blocked by a politicized opposition, by one Member State in particular.

The hypocrisy and cynicism displayed by that State, with its long history of terror, does not bode well for this Council and draws sad and alarming conclusions as to the screening process States undergo before attaining a seat on this august body. It was indeed a sad moment for this Council, but also one that should be a wake-up call to us all.

Lately, a particularly worrisome trend has become apparent when it comes to the discourse concerning our region. Some have a penchant for equating the lawful actions of States in defence of their citizens with the violence of terrorists whose goal is to endanger those very civilians. The misguided tendency to accept the status quo of terrorism, as expressed even by some United Nations officials in their statements and reports, is simply unacceptable. Such parity, which is often in the name of an ill-conceived balance, undermines the credibility of moderate States and their strength to bolster one another and isolate the extremists.

Israel goes to great lengths to ensure the safety and well-being of all civilian populations — Palestinians and Israelis alike. Whereas Israel makes all efforts to protect civilians in accordance with international law, Hamas indiscriminately fires rockets into Israeli civilian areas. Whereas Israel ensures that medicine and fuel enter the Gaza Strip to reach hospitals and needy civilians, Hamas hijacks those trucks and diverts them to its bomb-making factories and terrorist camps. Whereas Israel allows humanitarian convoys into Gaza — more than 1,600 trucks and over 20,000 tons of aid in recent weeks alone — Hamas cynically fires on those same crossing points, so it can fabricate a pretext for inciting the Palestinian public against Israel.

Moreover, the cruelty of Hamas continues to be seen in its holding of Gilad Shalit, who was abducted by that terrorist organization in June 2006 and begins today his twenty-second month in captivity. All the while, Hamas has refused to provide details of his condition or well-being. We continue to hope and pray for his safe return home.

Surely, no similarities can be drawn between Israel and Hamas. The immeasurable difference between the moderates and the extremists can be seen in both their rhetoric in this hall and their actions on the ground. In that context, I can only hope that my Palestinian colleague's poignant outcry against the deliberate killing of children, describing it as sinking into the abyss, was really directed at the Hamas terrorists he again somehow failed to mention by name. Let us be very clear: while for Israel every dead Palestinian child is a horrible mistake and a tragedy, for the terrorists, every dead Israeli child is a victory and a cause for celebration.

Allow me to briefly turn to the situation along our northern border. As you know, resolution 1701 (2006) changed the reality on the ground following the 2006 second Lebanon war and constituted an important achievement for this Council. Hence, the international community must ensure that the implementation of resolution 1701 (2006) remains a priority issue, and my delegation supports the Council taking the appropriate action to show its resolve.

In that context, I wish to draw attention to three main areas: first, stemming the illegal flow of weapons through the porous Syrian-Lebanese border; secondly, preventing the rearming of Hizbullah, which has already adapted its weaponry and tactics so as to take into account the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) presence south of the Litani River, as its spokesmen openly declare; and thirdly, the unconditional release of our boys, the Israeli soldiers Udi Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, kidnapped on 12 July 2006 by Hizbullah. The Council, in adopting resolution 1701 (2006), committed itself to seeing to their release, and I call on members to keep their word.

To be sure, the new and improved UNIFIL on the ground is doing important work, and, among the positives on the ground, Israel welcomes the trilateral meetings between the Israel Defense Forces, the Lebanese Army and UNIFIL, as well as efforts to demarcate the Blue Line.

However, as I began my statement referring to the dangers of extremism, here too it must be emphasized that Hizbullah poses an extremist threat to the region. Indeed, Hizbullah and Hamas share the same strategies and tactics and are funded and supported by the same ominous backers, Syria and Iran. The relationship between Iran, Syria, Hamas and Hizbullah are continually reinforced for us, as we recently saw in the expressions of sympathy and support made by those leaders, again just yesterday, regarding the arch-terrorist Imad Mughnieh.

Listen to the words of the terrorist leaders themselves, such as the Hamas commander in Gaza who recently told *The Sunday Times* newspaper that Hamas has "sent seven 'courses' of our fighters to Iran". According to the commander, a further 650 Hamas fighters have trained in Syria under instructors who learned their trade, techniques and ways in Iran. Sixty-two are in Syria right now. He said Hamas was modelling itself on Hizbullah. Clearly, Syria and Iran both play host to and support global and local terrorist organizations. The international community must press to end that support.

Israel understands it must work with the moderate, legitimate Palestinian Authority leadership to show the people of the region that the path of moderation will bring tangible benefit to all. That is why suspending the ongoing dialogue and talks between Israel and the Palestinians would be a grave mistake. The extremists have no real solutions to anybody's problems. All they want is to see our failure. Moderation must be seen as the only answer and legitimate alternative to extremism.

Israel knows it cannot accomplish this alone. It needs the support of like-minded moderate leaders in the region who understand the threat posed by the extremists — not just to us, but to them and the world — and are willing to do what it takes. This is a goal that all the moderates share. If we begin to show divisions and weaknesses, the extremists will take advantage of the indecision and hesitation.

The international community needs to strengthen the bilateral process between the two parties and to show a collective resolve to support the negotiations that will bring lasting security, stability and peace to all people of our region. That is the mandate of the international community. That is its calling; that is its duty.

This collective resolve must be shown, first and foremost, by this Council. We in Israel are committed to showing it each and every day, in partnership with the moderates around us, until moderation, modernity and common sense prevail.

Mr. Jurica (Croatia): Let me begin with words of thanks to the Secretary-General for his statement and to Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, Mr. Pascoe, for his briefing.

I would like to reiterate our full support for the Annapolis process, which offers the only realistic chance for peace. Despite recent difficulties, we are encouraged by the resumption of meetings between the two sides and by the recent high-level visits to the region.

The principle at the core of the peace process — the two-State solution, with a viable Palestinian State and a safe and secure Israel — should remain the ultimate goal for both sides. Any deviation from that course will eventually lead us away from that goal and will necessarily have negative effects on the outcome of the process.

As has been repeatedly stressed in our earlier debates this year, the peace process may also be imperilled by the absence of tangible improvements on the ground. We therefore welcome efforts to create a calm atmosphere conducive to negotiations and the implementation of the Road Map.

Actions such as the 6 March terrorist attack on a Jerusalem seminary — the very epitome of the Jewish identity — which we condemned in the strongest terms, are unjustifiable. Equally terrorizing is the launching of rockets into Israeli territory from Gaza by Hamas. Such acts, which give rise to the exercise of Israel's undeniable right to self-defence, are unacceptable and have to be brought to an end. Let me be clear — one cannot remain insensitive in the face of persistent and unapologetic armed provocations that threaten the security of Israel and its civilian population. Terrorist attacks cannot be justified under any circumstances.

However, Croatia shares the concerns raised about the serious humanitarian situation in Gaza, while being mindful of the circumstances that have contributed to creating it, namely, the violent takeover by Hamas last summer and its terrorist activities. We are nevertheless encouraged by Under-Secretary-General Pascoe's report on the improved importation of much-needed supplies into Gaza today.

We are aware that the present situation is negatively affecting the social and economic structure of Palestinian society and can also have a destabilizing effect on the peace process. We are particularly worried by the fact that even the relief effort is facing obstacles in a territory that is already heavily dependent on aid. We hope to see the early resumption of United Nations and other projects in Gaza, and we call on the parties to continue to work on the controlled reopening of Gaza crossings.

My delegation once again reiterates its view that only a permanent political settlement can fundamentally alter the economic and humanitarian problems faced by the Palestinians and bring lasting security for Israel. If some actors are allowed to continue with their destabilizing and terrorist attacks, the peace process will not be able to advance to its desired conclusion — a just and sustainable peace for both Israelis and Palestinians.

We continue to believe that 2008 is a decisive year for the Middle East. In particular, we hope that the parties will be able to reach a peace settlement based on the parameters agreed to in Annapolis. It is therefore crucial that the parties keep negotiating in good faith, thereby fulfilling their obligations under the first phase of the Road Map. International humanitarian law should guide the actions of all parties on the ground. No less important are the efforts towards Palestinian institution-building and economic reform.

Turning to Lebanon, let me stress that Croatia remains deeply preoccupied with the volatile political and security situation and lack of progress in overcoming the political paralysis in that country. In order to avoid the further destabilization of an already fragile Lebanese society, the convening of presidential elections should remain a priority.

The atmosphere of political uncertainty also remains an impediment for reaching the goals of resolution 1701 (2006), including those on disarmament issues. The continued allegations of breaches of the arms embargo, which Hizbollah does not deny, are disturbing, as is the recent bellicose rhetoric of its leaders. We condemn the continuing string of acts of intimidation and brutal attacks in Lebanon, which threaten the country's very sovereignty and its legitimate institutions. It is our belief that efforts to end impunity should be seen as an integral part of a sustained political process, and we salute the progress achieved thus far in setting up the Special Tribunal for Lebanon.

Mr. Ripert (France) (*spoke in French*): First of all, I would like to thank the Secretary-General for his introductory comments and to thank Mr. Pascoe for his presentation. Their statements underline the highly worrying character of the upturn in violence between the Palestinians and the Israelis in the past month. Once again, the civilian population has been seriously put to the test. Under these conditions, the most pressing need is the cessation of all violence.

First of all, France condemns all terrorist attacks, which seek to undermine the peace process. I am thinking here of the horrible attack perpetrated on 6 March against a seminary in Jerusalem; I also am thinking of the rocket attacks on the civilian population in southern Israel.

Moreover, France has condemned the recent Israeli military operations in Gaza, which, as the Secretariat emphasized, resulted in a large number of civilian fatalities, in particular women and children. In accordance with international law, Israel's legitimate right to self-defence cannot be objected to, nor can it be applied in a disproportionate or excessive manner.

The relative lull of the last few days is nevertheless encouraging, though it remains fragile. We support all efforts, in particular those of the States of the region, that could lead to a cessation of violence. The perspective sketched out by the parties themselves at Annapolis — an agreement on the establishment of a democratic, viable Palestinian State, living in peace and security side by side with Israel before the end of 2008 — is an objective that must be upheld and sustained. In addition to the end of violence, that will require confidence-building on the ground so that the Israeli and Palestinian populations will be able to see the positive developments affecting their daily lives.

In this regard, we cannot in any way ignore the situation in Gaza. First of all, a policy of cordoning off this territory and of collective punishment runs against international law. Moreover, it is contrary to bolstering the security of Israel. As will be stressed by the representative of Slovenia, speaking on behalf of the European Union, whose statement we fully align ourselves with, we demand that all crossing points into and out of Gaza be opened, be it for humanitarian or commercial activities. We note with satisfaction that the crossings have seemed less difficult for a few days now. We welcome this development and hope that it continues.

The European Union (EU) is ready to continue its follow-up mission in Rafah, in accordance with the November 2005 agreement on travel and access. All efforts aimed at facilitating a peaceful settlement of the crisis must be encouraged, as there is no military solution. For that purpose, we will undoubtedly have to hold discussions with Hamas at the appropriate moment. For their part, they must renounce violence, recognize Israel and respect the principles of the peace process.

The position of the international community on this issue is clear. First and foremost, the Palestinians, undoubtedly with the help of States of the region, must determine the conditions for a possible dialogue on inter-Palestinian reconciliation. In this regard, France welcomes the efforts undertaken by the President of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Beyond Gaza, we must continue to provide political and financial support to the Government of President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and their vision of the future Palestinian State. That was the objective of the Paris Conference last December, whose first fruits are beginning to be seen, in particular with regard to budgetary stabilization.

New impetus must be given to this approach. Donors must quickly meet their commitments, and the Palestinian Authority must pursue its efforts for the rapid and comprehensive implementation of the reform plan that was announced. In this regard, we take note of the strong mobilization of Palestinians to stabilize public finances and their significant efforts to reform the security services. Finally, this means that Israel must improve the circulation of goods and persons, which, as emphasized by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, is a prerequisite for full economic recovery.

Today, as was recalled by Mr. Pascoe, the French Minister for Foreign Affairs is visiting Brussels, meeting with his Norwegian counterpart, with the European Commission and with Tony Blair for a second follow-up meeting to the Paris Conference. The upcoming Ad Hoc Liaison Committee meeting in London and the future conferences in Bethlehem and in Berlin are also part of the same approach, and we support them fully.

Finally and especially, trust on the ground and the very solidity of the Annapolis process will be measured by the ability of the parties to fulfil their commitments and obligations without delay, particularly with regard to the Road Map. We know the factors of this equation. The Palestinians must continue their efforts with regard to security and fighting terrorism. Israel must do more with regard to the release of prisoners and to progressively repeal restrictions on circulation in the West Bank. It must also put an end to all kinds of settlement expansion and must dismantle the illegal outposts.

In this regard, France deplores the recently announced extensions of certain settlements. The building of settlements should cease, for it is a major impediment to peace, prejudicing the final status. As the President of the French Republic recently said, we believe that colonization runs counter to the security of the State of Israel.

With the European Union, and particularly in the context of the Quartet, France will provide the American authorities all necessary help in their task of supervising the implementation by the parties of their commitments and obligations, as recalled at Annapolis. The international community must also support the parties in their efforts and help them to find creative solutions and accept difficult compromises on this road towards peace. On that road, the Security Council will have an important role to play.

We also reaffirm our support for the Arab Peace Initiative, which, like the Security Council resolutions and the principle of land for peace, is one of the foundations of a comprehensive settlement.

Before concluding, I would like to touch upon the situation in Lebanon, where the priority remains to emerge from the political stalemate.

We have noted the new delay, to 22 April, of the parliamentary session to elect the President. This situation is risky. A few days before the summit of the Arab League, where, we deplore, Lebanon cannot be represented by a President, France recalls and reiterates the support it has given from the outset, with the EU, for the Arab League plan as well as for the efforts of its Secretary-General. France reaffirms its support for a legitimate and democratically elected Government of Lebanon, in charge until elections are held. France recalls the importance for the parties concerned, within and outside of Lebanon, to demonstrate restraint and a sense of responsibility in the face of the tension generated by the political stalemate. Finally, France underscores the importance of the implementation of Security Council resolutions, in particular resolutions 1701 (2006) and 1757 (2007).

Mr. Arias (Panama) (*spoke in Spanish*): First of all, I would like to thank you, Mr. President, for convening this open debate. Allow me also to thank the Under-Secretary-General, Mr. Lynn Pascoe, for his briefing, which shows us that the cycle of violence in the region continues and that the peace process between Israel and Palestine has apparently not progressed.

Moreover, the last months have clearly revealed the inability of the Security Council to reach an agreement on this matter. Not only did we fail to adopt a resolution on the precarious humanitarian and security situation in Gaza that exists due to the Israeli measures, but we were also unable to reach agreement on a press statement condemning last month's terrorist attack on a Jewish seminary in West Jerusalem. We have to add here that the debates held in the Security Council every month on this issue do not seem to contribute in any way to the peace process. In this context, however, we must express our recognition and appreciation for the efforts undertaken by the Secretary-General for peace in the region.

We all know that a final peace agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians must be based on the existence of two States living in peace with each other and with their neighbours, within the 1967 borders.

The latest significant initiative in this regard was the Annapolis Conference organized by the United States, in which the world placed renewed hope. Unfortunately, at this time the Annapolis process seems to have come to a standstill and is at risk of collapse. That would have serious consequences for a region already threatened by new and even bloodier conflicts.

For Panama, the lack of progress is due, inter alia, to two overriding factors. On the one side is the apparent lack of political resolve on the part of the Israeli Government to commit itself to a genuine negotiating process that, given its nature, would require relinquishing certain aspirations and positions. On the other side are the profound political differences among Palestinians parties, which lead to the inability to reach agreements with a view to establishing a national unity Government that could advance the negotiating process. The announcement of a new dialogue between Hamas and Fatah, under the auspices of Yemen, augurs well in this regard, though we cannot ignore the results of similar, earlier efforts.

Finally, everything seems to indicate that in order to create an environment conducive to a genuine negotiating process with a view to attaining a lasting and final peace, we must, in addition to resolving the aforementioned obstacles, take the following measures in the shortest possible time. Israeli must immediately and unconditionally end the construction of settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, including in West Jerusalem. Hamas must end its rocket attacks against Israel. Israel must end its incursions into occupied Palestinian territories and its siege of Gaza. Until these requirements have been met, all efforts for a peace process are doomed to failure.

There is nothing new in what we are saying. On the contrary, it is known by the majority, but it is not said by everyone here.

Mr. Ettalhi (Libyan Arab Jamahiriya) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I wish to thank you, Sir, for convening this meeting to discuss the situation in the Middle East. We also express our appreciation for the presence of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon among us this morning and thank Mr. Pascoe for his valuable briefing.

I wish to endorse the statement made by the Permanent Observer of Palestine and that to be made by the representative of the Sudan as the leader of the Group of Arab States this month.

There is no doubt that the situation in the Middle East in general and the Palestinian question in particular has represented and continues to represent one of the most serious threats to international peace and security, if not the most serious ever. That threat has been considered by the Security Council for more than six decades now and has led to numerous wars and continual aggressive assaults and attacks that have caused the great suffering of which we are all aware. The examples thereof cited by Mr. Pascoe this morning are but a few among many.

Developments have led to us to pause and consider how the threat has become increasingly serious and expansive with passing time. And yet, the Security Council, entrusted by the general membership of the United Nations under Article 24 of the Charter with the principal responsibility for maintaining international peace and security, has failed to assume the responsibility referred to in Article 1 of Chapter I of the Charter. We must ask why the Council is pussyfooting and unable to address the issue. All I can hope is that the victims and perpetrators of the aggression are being kept in mind throughout such vacillation.

Once again, if any situation calls for the Security Council's attention, it is the question of Palestine. Whatever standards the Council applies in determining its priorities, that question should be foremost among them. If there is a threat to peace, the issue should be clear. Among issues with humanitarian and human rights dimensions, is there any suffering in the world worse than that of the Palestinians at the hands of the Israeli occupiers? The evidence lies in the six million refugees and displaced persons living on assistance in refugee camps; the 1.5 million under siege in the Gaza Strip with no way of earning a living, and we believe that the right to life is among the most sacred of human rights; and the more than 2 million people in the West Bank who are humiliated daily. Pregnant women die at Israeli checkpoints, of which there are more than 600; children are terrorized every day on their way to school; and workers are unable to get to their jobs. They are all exposed to death, detention and arrest at any time.

The Security Council surely knows that, even according to Israeli sources, 40 per cent of Palestinian young people in the occupied territories have been detained or arrested at least once. The Council surely knows that, since this issue was considered last month, the Israel Defense Forces has killed more than 150 Palestinians, among whom, as Mr. Pascoe noted this morning, were 36 children and a 60-year-old peasant who was driven to his farm by hunger. As all have heard, Israel has announced its resolve to launch a holocaust of the Palestinians, as noted by the Israeli Deputy Defence Minister, not to mention those who have been arrested and detained in Israel, about whose suffering we heard in this morning's briefing. Does the Security Council not see that the war crimes of the occupying Power and its determination to annihilate the Palestinians collectively represent an attempt to ethnically cleanse the population by making life unbearable for them in the West Bank? I would remind members of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which I believe is very well known to them all.

Since the Council last met on this issue, the Israelis have continued to expand their settlements and their Prime Minister has emphasized the fact that they will continue to settle. When reminded of the commitments he undertook at the Annapolis conference and in the road map, he said that the settlement activity is taking place in land annexed by Israel to its own territory and that there was no further need to negotiate since there was nothing to negotiate about. Worse yet, in recent days, the competent judiciary body authorized the Israel Defense Forces to kill those who protest against the separation wall and determined that even a peaceful demonstration is an appropriate justification for murder. At the same time, the Israeli courts decided to prevent Palestinians from using public roads in the occupied territories. What kind of racist discrimination or injustice could be worse than that? Israel's actions prove that it is not committed to peace and is striving to ensure the failure of the current peace process. Israel is an entity based on injustice, ethnic cleansing and massacre and cannot act against its own nature.

Those who insist on bringing the peace process to a successful conclusion have been the first to call on the Security Council to condemn the settlements and siege and on the Israelis at least to enunciate an intention to cease such activities, if only by pronouncement.

The situation in Lebanon is a source of concern to my country. The intervention of foreign Powers in that brotherly country has created a complex crisis in the political situation, whereby the Lebanese parties have been unable to elect a president of the Republic, leading to a political vacuum. My country supports the actions of the Arab League to help our Lebanese brothers to find a solution compatible with the Taif Agreement.

We are concerned about Israel's ongoing daily violations against Lebanese air space, territorial waters and territory, which were referred to in the latest report of the Secretary-General; its continuing attacks and acts of aggression, including abduction and killings, against people in the border areas; as well as the ongoing occupation of the Shaba'a farms and other Lebanese territory. We are also concerned about the deliberate obstruction of efforts to demarcate the Blue and Green Lines, including Israel's confronting the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon as it tries to demarcate those Lines.

That is further evidence of the fact that Israel disregards and flouts — and I have chosen the words very carefully — the resolutions of the Council, especially resolution 1701 (2006). I should once again like to draw the attention of the members of the Council to the document circulated by the Permanent Representative of Lebanon with regard to that matter. I believe that the Council's ongoing disregard of Israeli practices has the effect of undermining its credibility. It also leads us to conclude that the Council has double standards.

Finally, I should like to remind the Council of resolution 497 (1981), adopted more than 25 years ago. In that resolution, the Council underscored the fact that Israel's decision to annex the occupied Syrian Golan and impose its laws there was null and void and without international legal effect. Israel has refused to accept the resolution, has continued its policy of judaization, making life difficult for the Syrian population, and has attempted to attract immigrants from all over the world to populate the region. Syria has chosen a just peace as a strategic option in return for its territories occupied prior to 1967. But Israel has chosen to continue its occupation, to defy the resolutions of the Council and to violate the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War.

In conclusion, Libya is honoured to say that it will always stand on the side of justice and condemn injustice and immorality in international law.

Mr. Le Luong Minh (Viet Nam): On behalf of my delegation, I would like to thank Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for his presence here today and for his address to the Council. Among other things, the Secretary-General has addressed a concern that we share about the continuing violence. He has also emphasized the need for continued negotiations — which we support — to resolve the Middle East conflict. I would also like to thank Under-Secretary-General Lynn Pascoe for his detailed briefing. My delegation shares the views of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) that will be presented by the representative of Cuba on behalf of NAM.

The resumption of negotiations between Israel and Palestine on final status issues and the international efforts in the Middle East peace process did give us some hope of moving closer to a just, comprehensive and lasting solution to the Israel-Palestine issue based on the establishment of an independent Palestinian State living in peace side-by-side with Israel. Our hope, however, is being dimmed by the realities on the ground.

My delegation is deeply concerned about the deterioration of the situation in the occupied Palestinian territory, where Israel's military attacks and its construction of illegal settlements and the wall in the West Bank continue. We remain deeply concerned about the fact that, in disregarding the repeated appeals of the international community, Israel has not relaxed its restrictive measures in the Gaza Strip, which are being implemented in violation of international law, including international human rights and humanitarian laws, and which are taking an alarming toll in human lives, especially those of women and children, and great suffering to the Palestinian population.

While expressing our sympathy for innocent Israeli civilians killed, injured or otherwise harmed in attacks targeting southern Israel and other acts of violence, acts which Viet Nam has condemned and will continue to condemn, we cannot accept that this is being used to justify the illegal actions of Israel to which I have referred. By aggravating the already tense situation on the ground, those actions are endangering the limited positive progress achieved since the launch of the Arab Peace Initiative and the Annapolis and Paris Conferences.

Whether the first act or the response, violence only adds to the never-ending spiral of its own. We urge the parties concerned to exercise maximum restraint and abide by international law, including international humanitarian and human rights law. We call upon Israel to put an end to those actions and abide by the spirit of the relevant Security Council and General Assembly resolutions, in order to de-escalate tension and create an atmosphere conducive to tangible results in the negotiations it is engaging in with Palestine on final status issues, thereby bringing the Middle East peace process back on track.

In the light of the difficulties that the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip are enduring as a result of restrictive Israeli measures, and while concurring with the Secretary-General's support for the Palestinian Authority's proposal to operate the Gaza crossings, we join the appeal to the international community, United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations to extend to them the necessary emergency and humanitarian assistance.

My delegation takes note of certain positive developments that have been recorded in the implementation of resolution 1701 (2006), such as the tripartite cooperation between Israel, Lebanon and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) to address key security and military operational issues, as well as the dialogues taking place between Lebanon and Syria on border delineation and demarcation. However, we are deeply concerned about the continuation of targeted attacks against Lebanese civilians and UNIFIL personnel, as well as about Israel's air violations and its occupation of the village of Ghajar, on the northern side of the Blue Line. We continue to share the concerns about repeated postponements of the presidential elections, the slow progress in the disarmament of armed groups, the lack of technical strike data of Israeli cluster munitions and the unresolved issue of Lebanese prisoners.

While we support the efforts undertaken by the League of Arab States and the Government of Lebanon to advance the political process, we urge all parties concerned to promote political dialogue and national reconciliation and to proceed to the presidential elections as planned. We continue to support resolution 1701 (2006) and call for its full implementation, especially with regard to respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Lebanon, the protection of assets and the livelihood of civilians, and the safety and security of international peacekeeping and humanitarian personnel.

The Middle East has seen too much bloodshed. Continued violence will only make the people of the region — Arabs and Israelis alike — shed more blood. The Middle East conflict can only be solved through peaceful dialogue and negotiations in accordance with the principle of land for peace and the relevant resolutions of the United Nations, taking into account the legitimate rights and interests of all parties concerned.

I wish to reaffirm Viet Nam's support for the roles of the Quartet, the League of Arab States, the countries of the region and the United Nations, especially the Security Council, in the quest for a lasting solution to the Middle East conflict along those lines.

Mr. Urbina (Costa Rica) (*spoke in Spanish*): I wish to begin by thanking your delegation, Mr. President, for organizing a series of public meetings, which, we believe, is very welcome to the Council and to the Organization as a whole. I also wish to welcome the presence of the Secretary-General and to thank Mr. Pascoe for his report and the Permanent Observer of Palestine and the Permanent Representative of Israel for their statements. I believe both have provided important insights, and I welcome the opportunity they were given to address the Council. I believe they have further enriched today's discussion.

The Security Council has become part of the problems of the Middle East. That was seen clearly during the last few weeks when this organ — one of the fundamental bodies of the multilateral system — was unable to condemn the blocking of the Gaza crossings, which resulted in a desperate humanitarian situation. Nor was it able to condemn the killings that took place at a Jewish seminary in West Jerusalem. The Security Council cannot remain part of the problems of the Middle East. It should become part of the solution to the crisis in that region.

It is normal for the parties to the conflict to accuse each other, and it is equally normal for each to justify its actions as a response to the actions of the other. What does not seem normal, nor acceptable, is for this Council to serve as an echo chamber for either of the parties. That road will not lead us to the peace that everyone claims to want.

We insist that this Council withstand the logic of causation that the parties have invoked. We cannot continue to approve the actions of either, believing, like them, that those actions are only justified responses to an earlier grievance. If we continue along that track the Security Council will remain part of the problems of the Middle East. However, if we find the necessary determination to condemn every act of violence, whatever its origin, the Council will have started to become a means to resolve the problems of the region.

In turn, we must also change the ways the United Nations system considers and approaches the humanitarian situation of the Palestinian people. Their humanitarian crisis, the gravest since 1967, is not just the obvious result of war and displacement. While the Palestinian territory has been reduced to 22 per cent of the territory set out in General Assembly resolution 181 (II), the number of families assisted by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) has multiplied by ten over the last ten years. The Palestinian population have not been well served, and now we must adopt a vision that replaces the palliative care provided the international community. Only an approach that envisages the normalization of their lives can prevent catastrophe, an approach that offers them productive labour and that promotes their economic, social and cultural development — an approach, finally, that would prevent the great catastrophe that appears to be taking shape there.

What should be equally clear is the great responsibility that the Palestinian leadership holds in shaping an environment conducive to development. There will be no development without peace. Building peace in the Middle East obliges the Palestinian leadership to put an end to terrorist attacks, to convince the most radical elements and to integrate them into their political life, to ensure that those radical elements learn to live in keeping with the maxim of the Mexican national hero who recalled that among individuals, as among nations, respect for the rights of others is peace.

Moreover, countries that have supported either one of the parties to the conflict also bear great responsibility. We believe it is neither just nor acceptable for Palestinians and Israelis to spill their blood using the resources and arms provided by others. That must end.

The Middle East must cease being the stage for the waging of a war that is supported from outside, a stop in the middle of an election campaign, or an obligatory visit for the leaders of the main Western countries. The international community must make decided efforts to forge peace in the Middle East. It must make a serious commitment, one that is met. One cannot live off promises such as those made at the Paris conference, many of which have not and never will become a reality.

Costa Rica is convinced that the international community has lost its way in the search for solutions to the situation affecting the Middle East. We have been unable to resolve the only crisis that has occupied this Organization for more than 60 years, and we are now divided between those who take one side to the conflict and those who take the other. Many nations that do not have a direct interest in the conflict are following the drama with anguish and are caught up in the destructive dynamic. Now, together, we must find the conditions that will make coexistence possible.

We said in earlier debates, and we feel obliged to repeat today, that it takes greater courage to agree than to disagree, that it is easier to raise walls that separate than to build bridges that unite. We consider constructive Yemen's efforts in opening a space for Palestinian dialogue, and we support the resolve of the Palestinians and Israelis to continue to negotiate in a highly difficult environment.

That is the only way. Costa Rica repeats its belief that we must leave behind, once and for all, the models of successive phases whereby one phase must be completed before moving on to the next. We call on the Israelis and Palestinians to address, as soon as possible, the final issues — negotiation of the borders and settlements, and the issue of refugees and their right to return and compensation, as well as the status of the city of Jerusalem. We do not seek to impose anything, as was agreed on in Annapolis by Mr. Olmert and Mr. Abbas in expressing their resolve to launch bilateral negotiations to reach a peace agreement that resolves all pending issues, including essential questions without any exception.

A few days ago we sent important signals concerning Lebanon. Now we must make clear our belief that once we find the road towards peace for Israel and the Palestinian State, it will be much easier to resolve the problems of Lebanon.

I would be remiss if I were to conclude without reiterating Costa Rica's belief that the membership of this Organization should be regularly informed in detail of the Quartet's activities. Since the Quartet involves some of the most important international protagonists and, for reasons that we do not understand, the Secretary-General participates in it on an equal footing with the other actors, we believe that our actions and decisions require the comprehensive and timely information I am calling for.

Mr. Natalegawa (Indonesia): I would like to begin by thanking the Secretary-General for his statement and Mr. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, for his briefing on the current situation in the Middle East.

This debate is pertinent as a forum in which delegations, particularly those of concerned countries from the region, and relevant organizations can reflect on ways to respond to the challenges of collectively bringing peace to the Middle East region.

The Middle East conflict has been going on for sixty years, and hope and despair have featured in every effort to end the conflict. The Annapolis conference is the most recent initiative aimed at ending a deadlock in the peace negotiations. It has injected a new vigour and has given new hope to the peace effort.

Yet, there is the risk of a disconnect between such hope and the situation on the ground. The cycle of violence has continued unabated. It has eroded confidence on both sides. Now there is an urgent need for rebuilding confidence. That will certainly require a complete end to violence. It will require immediate termination by Israel of all illegal activities, including the construction of settlements.

Compliance with international law by all parties must be promoted, and the utmost restraint must be exercised. Indonesia also shares the view of the Secretary-General, expressed during the Council's emergency meeting on the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip held on 1 March 2008, that incidents in which civilians have been killed or injured must be investigated and accountability must be ensured.

Indonesia believes that achieving the Annapolis goals will pave the way for a more comprehensive settlement of the Middle East conflict. We therefore welcome the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks on 17 March 2008, especially after a break of several weeks.

Indonesia also welcomes the forthcoming Middle East conference to be hosted by the Government of the Russian Federation. My delegation believes that the conference will provide a forum for strengthening the Annapolis process to achieve comprehensive peace in the region, including on the Israeli-Lebanese and Israeli-Syrian tracks.

Continued political and de facto divisions among Palestinians pose a particular constraint to unified efforts for the establishment of a sovereign and independent Palestinian State. We therefore continue to believe that an inter-Palestinian dialogue remains crucial.

The role of neighbouring countries in promoting inter-Palestinian reconciliation also remains important. The series of recent talks on inter-Palestinian dialogue within the framework of the Arab League or the initiative of individual neighbouring States is commendable. In that regard, my delegation is encouraged by the recent initiative of the Government of Yemen to promote inter-Palestinian dialogue.

The formation of a viable Palestinian economy is also key to the creation of durable peace in the region. We must, therefore, find ways to rebuild the devastated economy in the occupied Palestinian territory. In that regard, we underline the importance of the continued support and assistance of the international community, including the realization of pledges made during the Paris donors conference. Indonesia, together with South Africa, will convene later this year the Afro-Asian Conference for Capacity-Building of the Palestinian people, to be held in Jakarta.

Peace is of little value to someone who is dying of sickness or hunger. In the same vein, peace talks will mean nothing to a large part of Palestinians, who continue to live in harsh conditions. With nearly 85 per cent of the Gaza population relying on food assistance from the United Nations and other humanitarian agencies, the humanitarian situation in Gaza remains an issue of concern.

The freedom of Palestinians in Gaza from want and destitution must be immediately ensured. Thus, my delegation fully supports the work of the many United Nations agencies and other humanitarian partners on the ground. We also join the call of the Secretary-General on the international community to heed the consolidated appeal for Palestine launched in February 2008.

Humanitarian relief itself cannot address the suffering in Gaza as long as the Gaza crossings remain closed. My delegation therefore continues to underline the importance of the opening of the border crossings into Gaza permanently and without delay to facilitate the passage of imports and exports and the access of humanitarian workers to the area. Full implementation of the Agreement on Movement and Access is critical, particularly in view of the impact of crossings on the Palestinian economy and daily life. We also welcome the proposal made by the Palestinian Authority to assume responsibility for the Palestinian side of the Gaza Strip's border crossings and encourage contacts between Israel and the Palestinian Authority to act on that proposal.

With regard to the situation in Lebanon, peace and stability in the country are essential, not only for the Lebanese themselves, but also for all peoples in the region. Thus, the continued political impasse and repeated postponements of the presidential election remain issues of concern to my delegation.

Prolonging the constitutional void in Lebanon will be harmful not only to internal stability but also to the democratic process. It must, therefore, be avoided. While efforts exerted by the international community and regional States are of paramount importance, the final resolution of the internal conflict will be at the hands of the Lebanese people. We therefore stress the urgency of concerted efforts being made by all parties concerned in the country to end the political deadlock and build a consensus that leads to the election of a President.

The Middle East conflict has been for far too long tarnishing what our time could offer in creating a peaceful and liveable region. It has for far too long been wearing on the parties of the region. Finding a peaceful, just, lasting and comprehensive settlement to the conflict will thus be absolutely critical. Indonesia is committed to such an endeavour, on the basis of the relevant resolutions of the Council, including resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 1515 (2003), the Madrid terms of reference, the principle of land for peace, and the Arab Peace Initiative.

Mr. Kafando (Burkina Faso) (*spoke in French*): We would like to begin by thanking the Secretary-General for his introduction and the Under-Secretary-General, Mr. Pascoe, for his presentation on the situation in the Middle East.

In a few days, in Damascus, a summit of Heads of State and Government of the Arab League will be convened. We hope that the summit will be a decisive stage in the search for peace and will help to ease the suffering endured by the Palestinian people.

As we are now well aware of the situation in the region, which is a direct consequence of the confrontation between Israel and its neighbours, we are especially concerned by the humanitarian tragedy still experienced by the population of the occupied Palestinian territories, in particular Gaza. We therefore reiterate our call to Israel to take a humanitarian approach and put an end to the siege of Gaza.

We must also, however, underscore the collective fear under which the Israeli population lives, with rockets being launched from Palestinian territories. The Palestine Authority, in our view, should exercise all its rights over its territories.

We have always stated that it is, first and foremost, the two parties, Israel and Palestine, that must create suitable conditions for dialogue and negotiations. In that respect, we feel encouraged by the recent meeting in Sana'a, held under the aegis of the Government of Yemen, of the two main Palestinian factions, which have promised to engage in dialogue.

We also welcome the resumption of the Palestinian/Israeli negotiations. However, we fear that the continued construction by Israel of the wall of separation and the expansion of its policy of settlement in the Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem and the occupied Syrian Golan, could affect these negotiations.

In Lebanon, another theatre of conflict, the Secretary-General's last report (S/2008/135) notes the repeated Israeli violations of that country's air space, and thus of the provisions of resolution 1701 (2006). Such a situation is most disturbing, and of course of concern to the Security Council.

Moreover, and on the basis of resolutions 1680 (2006) and 1701 (2006), we wish to see a resumption of the work of the Commission charged with delineating the Syrian-Lebanese border in order to resolve the thorny issue of the borders, including that of the Shebaa farms.

We are forced to note, however, that unfortunately all these solutions seem far off as long as the political and institutional impasse affecting Lebanon has not been resolved, in particular by the election of a president of the Republic.

The overall situation in the region, the complexity and seriousness of which are keenly felt by all of us, calls for speedy and concrete actions by the international community, and especially by the Security Council.

The inability of the Council to enforce its resolutions is obvious and could, in the long run, undermine its credibility. That is why, as we have already stressed, the Security Council should consider innovative, bold and pragmatic solutions that can assist in the achievement of progress by ending the deadlock.

One thing is clear — only a comprehensive approach, with the participation of the main stakeholders, both from within the region and beyond, can establish the basis for lasting peace in the Middle East. That is the reason why my country believes that the consideration of the Arab Peace Initiative, which calls for the immediate implementation of the provisions of resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973), could also serve as a significant step in a fair resolution of the Middle East situation.

Sir John Sawers (United Kingdom): I apologize to colleagues for missing much of the earlier debate. I was attending the commemoration of the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade in an adjacent room.

I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude for the briefing that the Council received earlier. I will study it and the speeches we have heard closely.

At the end of 2007, we all spoke of a window of hope in our common efforts to achieve a two-State solution in the Middle East. Some cautioned against allowing this window to close since it might be the last opportunity. We need to get back to a level of optimism. With political will, we can stop the window from closing. All of us need to encourage an early resumption of negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians and to secure visible progress from these negotiations in order to bring the focus back to the political process. It is the political process that offers the only prospect for a solution and peace in the region. We look to Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas to continue to demonstrate strong leadership in search of peace at a difficult time. We look to them to resume negotiations at the earliest opportunity.

As part of the Quartet, the United Nations has a responsibility to influence the peace process, to encourage both sides to take difficult but necessary steps. That can only be done through a balanced approach, as far as possible achieving consensus here in the Security Council.

Broader support for the peace process, in particular in the region, is also invaluable. We welcome the international community's continued efforts, including the recent visit by United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and the Yemeni initiative to support intra-Palestinian dialogue.

The situation on the ground, and in particular in Gaza and southern Israel, is of great concern to my Government. We have been deeply saddened by the civilian casualties on both sides. The United Kingdom unequivocally condemns the incessant rocket attacks against Israel and the appalling attack on the seminary in Mercaz Harav. Measures in response must be in accordance with international law and not cause suffering to innocent civilians. We look to the Israeli authorities to achieve that objective.

Both sides have obligations under the Road Map. It is important that each side takes steps to meet these obligations without waiting for the other to make the first move. The Palestinians must address Israeli security concerns, making visible efforts on the ground to arrest, disrupt and restrain those who conduct and plan violent attacks on Israelis.

Israel should freeze all settlement activity, including the natural growth of existing settlements. The United Kingdom considers that Israeli settlement building anywhere in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is illegal under international law. That includes settlements in both East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza remains of grave concern. Essential services, including water and sanitation, are close to breakdown, and a number of essential medical items and drugs are out of stock.

The United Nations should support efforts to open Gaza crossings. We in the European Union are ready to redeploy our border assistance mission at Rafah at the earliest opportunity.

A long-term solution to the situation in Gaza must address both Israeli security and Palestinian hardship. That can only come from a political process. The efforts of the international community must be in support of the Annapolis process in order to achieve this objective.

In addition to our ongoing humanitarian support, the United Kingdom continues to address the economic and development needs that are vital to political progress. The Bethlehem investors' conference will take place with our support in mid-May, and it is our hope that that will lead to real improvements on the ground. The Ad Hoc Liaison Committee will meet in London at the beginning of May in order to coordinate donor activity and provide a clear demonstration of international support for the Annapolis process.

I would also like to make a couple of points on Lebanon. The Government of Lebanon needs the support of the international community. The continued political impasse and insecurity in Lebanon are a major concern. The United Kingdom continues to support the efforts of Amre Moussa, the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, to promote a solution.

All countries with influence in Lebanon, in particular Syria, must play a constructive role. The Arab League summit in Damascus this week marks an opportunity to make progress. We urge Syria, as hosts, to take the steps necessary for a resolution in Lebanon to be reached, and we urge all actors in the region to work in the interests of stability and democracy in Lebanon.

Sustained United Nations engagement is crucial. That includes the implementation of all Security Council resolutions on Lebanon and the Secretary-General's continued leadership. The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon continues to play a vital role in providing security in the south. Once again, the United Kingdom is grateful to the troop-contributing countries for the work they are doing alongside the Lebanese armed forces.

Mr. Spatafora (Italy): At the outset, I also wish to express my very sincere appreciation for the presence here of the Secretary-General and for his thoughts and assessments. I think that it is a very important sign of the commitment of the United Nations as part of the Quartet. I also thank Under-Secretary-General Pascoe for his very comprehensive, as always, briefing that gives us the feeling of where we are.

Italy fully aligns itself with the statement that will be delivered shortly by the Presidency of the European Union. Let me just add a few remarks.

We strongly support the effort that President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert have undertaken to move the bilateral negotiations forward despite the difficulties of a fragile political context and the highly volatile situation on the ground. I think that the questions that the Secretary-General asked truly capture what should be in all of our minds — If not now, when? If not this, what? I think that these are the questions that the players should keep in mind at all times.

As has already been mentioned by the Secretary-General, negotiations are the only way to achieve peace. In this regard, we emphasize once more the importance of the facilitating role played by the Arab States, and we welcome as well the support given by the Arab League to the good offices carried out by President Saleh of Yemen to reactivate the indispensable inter-Palestinian dialogue.

Looking at the situation from the ground — and I think that more and more we have to look at it from that perspective — we believe that it is increasingly urgent to show the first dividend of the negotiations to the public opinions of the two parties and of the countries in the region. It is indispensable that measures be adopted rapidly to improve the lives of the Palestinian people by easing restrictions on their movements and removing checkpoints in the West Bank.

It is essential that conditions be created to reinvigorate the Palestinian economy on the basis of the Palestinian Reform and Development Plan adopted by the Fayyad Government. To this end, we support the efforts of the Quartet representative, Tony Blair, and urge all donors to concretize the financial pledges they announced at the Paris Conference.

We also believe that the Palestinian Government efforts to strengthen its public security apparatus should be supported. Italy therefore supports the German initiative to convene a conference on rule of law and intends to contribute to the consolidation of the operative capacity of the Palestinian civil police through the European Union Coordinating Office for Palestinian Police Support and urges other countries to do the same.

In this framework, Italy is particularly concerned about the Israeli Government position to continue building in East Jerusalem. We wish to reiterate that the building of settlements in occupied Palestinian territories, including in East Jerusalem, is illegal under international law. The continuation of settlement activity in the occupied territory is currently a threat to the bilateral negotiations. It seriously weakens the credibility of the Palestinian leadership in the view of its public opinion while strengthening arguments of the extremists and enemies of peace.

Finally, we express support for the monitoring role being played by the United States, in particular the convening on 14 March of the first trilateral meeting provided for by the Annapolis Conference. It is important for those meetings to become an instrument available to the parties to give greater depth to the dialogue.

Now, just a few remarks on Lebanon. As are others, we, too, are deeply concerned by the lack of signs of progress towards a solution to the political crisis. Together with the European Union, we support the mediation initiative of the Arab League and the efforts of its Secretary-General. We hope that the upcoming Damascus summit will mark a turning point in the crisis.

It is important, above all, to avoid any further deterioration of the security situation, which could lead to a very dangerous escalation of violence. The Lebanon crisis has to be resolved first and foremost through a mature assumption of responsibility by the Lebanese political forces. We are convinced, nevertheless, that action has to be taken at the regional level in an expanded strategy that takes into account the multiple actors involved, along with their aspirations.

In this context, we are pleased with the progress made in the establishment of a special tribunal on the Hariri assassination and the financial support received thus far and the prospect of the tribunal actually beginning operating.

Finally, we reiterate the importance of the continued presence of United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) for the stability of Lebanon. We encourage the Lebanese armed forces and the Israeli Defense Forces to consult with UNIFIL to find solutions to the problems on the ground and to continue efforts for the demarcation of the Blue Line.

We took note with special attention of the most recent report of the Secretary-General (S/2008/135) and its recommendations which we support, in particular on what concerns a new mission of the Lebanon Independent Border Assessment Team.

Mr. Kumalo (South Africa): Let me begin by thanking the Secretary-General for having come to this meeting earlier and Mr. Lynn Pascoe for briefing the Security Council on this very important subject.

My delegation aligns itself with the statement to be delivered later today by the Permanent Representative of Cuba on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement.

Let me also commend you, Mr. President, for convening this meeting in the open format, which allows affected parties and the relevant regional groups to participate. My delegation has always held the view that the Security Council should be more transparent and that issues such as the debate on the Middle East should be held in an open format so as to allow all relevant role-players, including the general membership of this Organization, the opportunity to address the Council on this conflict, which has plagued us for more than 60 years.

A month ago we heard briefings by the Personal Representative to the Secretary-General, Mr. Robert Serry, and by Mr. John Holmes, the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator. Those briefings presented a bleak outlook on the peace process between Palestine and Israel, as well as on the humanitarian situation in the occupied Palestinian territories. Sadly, that situation has not changed. In fact, as we have just heard, the situation has further deteriorated in the last month. Innocent civilians on both sides continue to suffer the consequences of the elusiveness of peace.

In spite of what we may have heard, the problem in the Middle East is the occupation of Palestine. An occupation that has gone on for 40 years is the fundamental issue to be addressed, and until we address the illegal occupation of Palestine, we will not succeed in making progress in resolving this intractable issue.

Clearly there is a disconnect between the quest for a peaceful solution to the conflict in the Middle East and the actual situation on the ground, including what is being done by the international community to address that situation. The optimism that we all felt after the meeting in Annapolis and the Paris pledging conference is unfortunately dissipating.

The situation in the occupied Palestinian territories is deteriorating daily. In the West Bank, the continued expansion of illegal settlements, military posts, check points and the separation wall already undermines the prospects for achieving a viable and contiguous Palestinian State and is in clear violation of United Nations resolutions and the Road Map. The expansion of illegal settlements in Jerusalem, in particular, predetermines a solution on the future of Jerusalem, which should be the basis of a negotiated solution.

Regarding the surge in the building of those illegal settlements, we wish to recall the recent statement of the Secretary-General, who, on 10 March 2008, expressed his concern over the approval by the Government of Israel of a resumption of construction of 750 housing units in the West Bank settlement of Givat Zeev. The Secretary-General stated that any settlement expansion is contrary to Israel's obligations under the Road Map and, indeed, to international law. He called on the Government of Israel to halt settlement expansion and reiterated that the fulfilment of Road Map obligations by both parties is an important measure underpinning the political process between them.

The military offensive by the Israeli Defense Forces in Gaza and the total blockade of Gaza have further exacerbated the humanitarian tragedy. This Council's inability to condemn what is occurring in Gaza or even to express concern at the situation is indeed unfortunate and further creates the impression that the Security Council is once again ignoring the plight of innocent Palestinian civilians who live under occupation.

Israeli measures make life unbearable for Palestinian civilians, are an affront to human dignity and are also a clear violation of international law. Even United Nations personnel and the local diplomatic community are subjected to these daily hardships, humiliations and provocations.

The South African Government has consistently condemned attacks on civilians, whether Palestinian or Israeli. We have argued that the continuous rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel cannot be justified in the name of the Palestinian cause. Indeed it is against the interest of the Palestinian people and only results in military retaliation by the Israeli Defense Force. We condemn attacks such as those that occurred at the seminary in Jerusalem, which resulted in the killing and injury of innocent civilians.

South Africa believes that, for progress to be made in the talks, the Palestinians need something tangible to convince them that a negotiated peace can lead to the establishment of a Palestinian State based on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Finally, my delegation continues to believe that the peace process resuscitated at Annapolis presents a meaningful attempt to find a lasting solution. The parties and the international community cannot sit back and allow the situation on the ground to continue deteriorating, ending all hopes for a negotiated two-State solution. The primary responsibility for peace and security lies with the parties. In that regard, it is crucial that their actions and pronouncements be calculated to advance the quest for peace.

Mr. Khalilzad (United States of America): Allow me to join my colleagues in thanking the Secretary-General for addressing the Council earlier and Under-Secretary-General Pascoe for his update.

The United States continues to work to support progress towards an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement before the end of 2008. Vice President Cheney and Secretary Rice each visited the region earlier this month to encourage progress in negotiations and on the ground. Secretary Rice will return to the region later this week to continue her discussions with the parties.

When we last met, we were rightly concerned about the escalation of violence in southern Israel and Gaza caused by an increase in terrorist rocket attacks by Hamas that led to an Israeli military response in self-defence. Subsequently, on 6 March, a terrorist gunman opened fire at a Jewish religious school in Jerusalem, killing eight young Israeli students and wounding 11 others, which the United States and many other Governments rightly condemned as a vicious targeting of innocent civilians.

As we recall those events, let me make clear that the United States deeply deplores the death of all innocent civilians. In the wake of that tragedy, which Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas unequivocally condemned, the United States supported the Government of Israel's courageous decision to reaffirm its commitment to negotiations. Israeli and Palestinian leaders continue to meet to work towards the shared goal of a permanent status agreement. Constructive regional and international support that enjoys the support of the parties for their efforts remains crucial.

With that in mind, I would like to make two additional points. The first is the need to achieve progress on the ground in order to create an atmosphere supportive of the negotiating process and to reassure Israelis and Palestinians alike of the seriousness of the process. General Fraser, who leads the United States efforts to monitor progress on road map implementation, has just returned from the region, where he convened a trilateral meeting with the parties to assess progress and discuss next steps to fulfil the parties' commitments under the road map. The General had a frank and positive exchange with the parties and is working with them to promote progress in that area. Secretary Rice will use her next round of meetings with Israeli and Palestinian leaders later this week to further encourage progress.

The second is the critical importance of support from the international community to ensure that Palestinian humanitarian needs are being met and that nations are following through on their pledges from the Paris donor conference. Those efforts will help President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad build the institutional capacity and develop the economy that will serve as the foundation for a Palestinian State. For our part, the United States continues to provide basic humanitarian assistance to Palestinians living in Gaza through ongoing United States Agency for International Development programmes and annual contributions to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

The United States is the largest bilateral donor to UNRWA. In fiscal year 2007, we contributed over $154 million to UNRWA and we have to date pledged

$148 million in 2008. Our contributions to UNRWA support its provision of basic and vocational education, primary health care, and relief and social services to over 4.4 million registered Palestinian refugees in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, as well as its provision of emergency food, health, job creation and other relief services to Palestinian refugees in the West Bank and Gaza.

We are also moving forward with assistance programmes utilizing the $545-million pledge for assistance to the Palestinian Authority that Secretary Rice announced in Paris last December. Most recently, on 19 March, we signed a cash transfer agreement with Prime Minister Fayyad, providing $150 million in budgetary support to the Palestinian Authority. Much more is needed, and we encourage Paris conference participants to urgently provide the assistance they have pledged. We look forward to reviewing progress in that area at the upcoming meeting of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee. We welcome Tony Blair's continuing leadership role in that area, including his involvement in planning the 21-23 May Bethlehem private sector investment conference. We also support Germany's proposed meeting later this spring to focus donor support on building the capacity of the Palestinian justice sector.

Turning to Lebanon, I would like to thank the Secretariat for the efforts under way to rapidly facilitate the work of the Special Tribunal. We look forward to the update on the Tribunal scheduled for Thursday. I urge all Council members to generously support the Tribunal as a clear signal that the international community backs the effort of the Lebanese people to end the era of impunity for political assassinations in their country.

I would like to underscore our deep concern about illegal arms transfers across the Syrian-Lebanese border, and in particular claims by Hizbullah that it has replenished its military capacity since the 2006 war. We fully support the Secretary-General's call for a process to disarm all militias in Lebanon in accordance with resolutions 1559 (2004) and 1701 (2006) and the Taif Accords. In accordance with those resolutions, Hizbullah must disarm, and it must do so now.

Finally, I would like to reiterate our concern that it has not yet been possible for the Lebanese to hold a presidential election. Although the Lebanese agree on a candidate, Syria and its allies within Lebanon are using other preconditions to perpetuate the political stalemate. It should be clear, however, until a new president takes office, the United States has full confidence in and fully supports the legitimate Lebanese Government in managing the affairs of the State and the Lebanese armed forces in continuing to provide security.

Allow me to conclude my statement by offering a brief comment on the format of this monthly meeting. Since 2002, it has been the practice of this Council to have regular briefings on the developments in the Middle East. Yet the polarization and divisions of the United Nations membership over the conflict all too often manifest themselves as heated political statements in both the General Assembly and the Security Council that do little to help advance the cause of peace or help the Palestinian people in any tangible way. It has long been the conviction of the United States that a solution will be achieved only by direct negotiations between the parties, facilitated and supported by constructive international engagement. That is why the bulk of our efforts are focused on making a difference on the ground. If these types of meetings do not contribute to that effort — or, worse, if they fuel the tensions that impede constructive engagement — then we need to ask ourselves whether the public format of debates in New York truly helps to create the environment necessary to facilitate the pursuit of the two-State solution. I therefore urge my colleagues to use these meetings to promote the cause of peace and the pursuit of the two-State solution.

Mr. Verbeke (Belgium) (*spoke in French*): I would like to thank the Secretary-General for his introduction at the beginning of this meeting. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Under-Secretary-General for his briefing.

Belgium associates itself with the statement to be delivered by our colleague from Slovenia in his country's capacity as President of the European Union.

The Israeli and Palestinian peoples are living through a very trying time, which has aroused concern among Belgian officials. Given the impact of the escalation of violence on the civilian populations of Israel and Gaza, Belgium has reiterated its resolute condemnation of Palestinian rocket launches. While acknowledging the right of Israel to defend itself, my country's officials have joined the Secretary-General in condemning the disproportionate nature of Israel's response. Moreover, along with its European partners, Belgium has unreservedly condemned the terrorist attack against Yeshiva Mercaz Harav on 6 March 2008.

There are reasons for both hope and despair in the current diplomatic situation. As far as the elements for hope, we should commend the political courage of President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert, who, while continuing dialogue, have not allowed violence to destroy the bilateral negotiations process launched at Annapolis.

While leaving it up to the parties to negotiate the parameters of a final settlement, it is incumbent upon the international community to support their efforts. In that connection, Belgium regrets that, despite its repeated efforts, the Security Council has not been able to play its role in condemning violence and encouraging diplomacy.

We welcome the first meeting organized between the parties by General Fraser. Whatever will there may be on the part of the Palestinians and the Israelis to reach a solution, we must admit that, more than ever before, the absence of progress on the ground will undermine the political process. Belgium therefore encourages the Quartet and its Representative, Tony Blair, to support and complement the efforts of General Fraser to help the parties to implement their respective commitments, beginning with those under the Road Map and the Agreement on Movement and Access.

Although they may appear to be difficult to implement, that difficulty pales in comparison with the price the Palestinians and Israelis will have to pay if the peace process becomes bogged down once again. The urgency of this matter has led the international community to become deeply involved. Its commitment was evidenced at Paris last December, and will once again be on display on the security and economic fronts at the upcoming conferences to be held in Bethlehem and Berlin.

Nevertheless, those efforts will be productive only if they complement those of the parties. It is for that reason that we launch an urgent appeal to Israel to halt the expansion of existing settlements, dismantle illegal outposts and gradually lift obstacles to movement in the West Bank. We call on the Palestinian Authority to intensify its efforts in the area of security, including by proceeding to restructure its security forces and to dismantle terrorist infrastructure.

With regard to the situation in and around the Gaza Strip, Belgium welcomes the peace that has prevailed in recent days, as well as the partial reopening of the crossings at Kari and Sufa. As for Hamas, which has de facto control over the Gaza Strip, the current calm must urgently be followed up by concrete steps to assume its responsibilities towards the Palestinian population, and that of Gaza in particular. We therefore demand that Hamas put a complete end to the launching of rockets, restore the rule of law, which the Palestinian people deserve, and return control of the Gaza Strip to the sole legitimate control of the Palestinian Authority.

In that regard, and given the serious humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip, Belgium reaffirms the readiness of the European Union to facilitate the implementation of a solution that makes possible the reopening of crossings for humanitarian and commercial purposes.

I should like to conclude by saying a few words about Lebanon. Regardless of the obstacles encountered, Belgium would like to reiterate its unreserved support for the mediation efforts of the League of Arab States and its Secretary-General, Mr. Amre Moussa. We hope that in the days remaining before the holding of the Damascus summit, all parties will be able to assume their responsibilities and make a constructive contribution.

The seventeenth postponement of presidential elections should not deter us from goals that all of us know are crucial to stabilizing Lebanon and the whole of the region. We would like to reaffirm our support to the Lebanese Government and armed forces. Pending a resolution of the current issues through the resumption of a national dialogue, those institutions have been able to ensure the unity, sovereignty and independence of Lebanon. We also support the efforts of the Secretary-General to implement all aspects of resolution 1701 (2006) on the basis of the deployment of Lebanese forces and the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon south of the Litani River. The political process set out in August 2006 includes all the elements necessary to guarantee Lebanon's sovereignty and stability in an atmosphere of lasting peace.

Mr. Liu Zhenmin (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): The Chinese delegation would like to thank you, Mr. President, for convening this open meeting on the question of the Middle East. We would also like in particular to thank the Secretary-General for his presence today, as well as for the statement he has delivered. Moreover, we wish to thank Under-Secretary-General Pascoe for his briefing.

The situation in the Middle East has changed drastically in the past month. The armed conflict in Gaza has resulted in enormous casualties among the civilian population. At the moment, the situation has eased somewhat. Nevertheless, it continues to be very fragile and threatens to result in an escalation of the conflict at any moment. It is our hope that the parties can take advantage of this very unusual respite and redouble their efforts to ensure a comprehensive and lasting ceasefire as soon as possible. That would be conducive to ensuring security for both sides, as well as normal lives for the Palestinian people.

China appreciates the efforts made by Egypt to that end. We hope that the parties concerned will demonstrate flexibility, genuinely renounce violence and militancy and commit themselves to dialogue and negotiation on an equal footing in order to resolve the problem.

China welcomes the pledge made by Israel and Palestine to continue political negotiations. We hope that both sides will be able to overcome every distraction and speed up the negotiating process through concrete actions. Both parties should avoid any actions that might poison the atmosphere for negotiations. Recently, Israel announced its decision to expand settlements. That is not conducive to building up mutual trust.

We welcome the efforts made by Yemen to promote direct dialogue between the various factions in Palestine. We also welcome the fact that the two major factions have signed agreements and are continuing dialogue and consultations. As we have always emphasized, strengthening the internal unity of Palestine is a very important precondition for the success of the political negotiations between Israel and Palestine, which will eventually lead to the realization of a comprehensive peace. The international community should also continue to provide Palestine with assistance, help the Palestinian authorities enhance their capacity-building and improve the livelihoods of the Palestinian people. That would be conducive to consolidating the support of the Palestinian people for the negotiation process.

The Middle East peace process is faced with very serious challenges at the moment. The process launched in Annapolis has already made an important first step. But it is also faced with various kinds of obstacles. The international community must think in depth about how to inject new vitality into the Annapolis process. We support the ideas of the Russian Federation concerning the holding of a follow-up meeting to Annapolis. We are confident that efforts for preparations and to allow all concerned parties to participate will not only help to consolidate the achievements of the negotiations, but will also create similar conditions for broader and deeper negotiations in the next stage.

Syria-Israel and Lebanon-Israel negotiations are also important components of the Middle East peace process. Launching negotiations on those two tracks at an appropriate time and making progress on them will help to achieve a comprehensive peace in the Middle East. We hope that the parties concerned will provide more support to the negotiations on those two tracks.

The presidential election in Lebanon has again been postponed. The political and security situation in Lebanon has been tense. That has highlighted the importance of maintaining stability and an early solution to their political differences. We support the continued efforts of the Arab League to find a solution to the political crisis in Lebanon, and we hope that all the parties in Lebanon will put their national interests first and adhere to dialogue and consultations to resolve their differences and seek consensus.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I will now make a statement in my capacity as representative of the Russian Federation.

We are grateful to the Secretary-General, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, for his statement and presence at today's meeting. We also thank the Under-Secretary General, Mr. Pascoe, for his briefing on the situation in the Middle East.

Today the Middle East is living through an especially critical time. The tasks facing the parties to the peace process are many. They must be resolved in a situation in which a definitive end to violence continues to elude us. That is something that we consider to be an unconditional priority.

Of special concern is the recent situation concerning the settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli question. Our utmost efforts should be aimed at ending the deaths of peaceful Palestinians and Israelis, putting an end to the firing of rockets at Israeli territory and lifting the Gaza blockade, which has become absolutely intolerable.

The Russian Federation provides and will continue to provide economic and financial assistance to the Palestinians and is assisting in the strengthening of the Palestinian security forces. Those topics and others were addressed during the recent visit by our Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, to the region.

We consider it especially important that, regardless of the aforementioned problems complicating the peace process, President Abbas of the Palestinian Authority and Prime Minister Olmert remain committed to furthering dialogue and implementing the agreements reached at Annapolis and that they agree, by the end of the year, on the parameters for a final settlement. No less important is the parties' strict compliance with the part of the Annapolis agreement that reaffirms the obligation of the parties to implement the Road Map, including the necessity of refraining from any actions that could undermine the reaching of a final status settlement. In that context, we are quite clearly disturbed by the continuing Israeli settlement activity. We call for a complete freeze on that activity in accordance with the demands of the Quartet.

Russia is committed to the concepts and principles of the peace process and is trying to visualize the Middle East as a region of peace and stability, where all States, including Israel, live in security, in conditions that are optimal to resolving socio-economic problems and in the closest possible cooperation with one another.

To achieve that objective, the efforts of the international community to mobilize support for the Annapolis process and ensure its success must be stepped up. To that end, we are conducting active consultations with the Quartet, regional and United Nations partners and other interested parties to achieve a preliminary understanding on the convening in Moscow of an international meeting on the Middle East. We hope that in the very near future we will be in a position to determine its conduct, schedule and agenda.

In Annapolis, agreements that enjoyed everyone's support were adopted. We must now confirm that support by prompting Israelis and Palestinians to implement those agreements effectively.

It is also important to create the necessary conditions to achieve progress on the Syrian and Lebanese tracks of the Middle East settlements.

When Palestinian and Israeli negotiations lead to results — and we hope that that will come about very soon — an unavoidable issue will be how those agreements will be viewed by all Palestinians. That is why the restoration of Palestinian unity is something that we view as especially important, and we welcome the agreements achieved between Fatah and Hamas representatives in Sana'a on the resumption of inter-Palestinian dialogue. It is important that from the very outset those initial contacts be constructive and focus on the key problems facing the Palestinian people: how to restore the political and legal integrity of the Palestinian territories' and the parameters for the dialogue process with Israel. We hope that many of those problems will be discussed in depth and will possibly be resolved at the upcoming Arab League summit, to be held in Damascus.

To conclude, I would like to say a few words on Lebanon, which is again gripped by unrest and where extremist groups are stepping up their activities and all political factions are building up their forces. Russia is a firm champion of unswerving compliance with the provisions of resolution 1701 (2006) and other Security Council resolutions that prohibit the supplying of arms to any irregular groups in Lebanon. We continue to support the constitutional order of Lebanon and its legitimate institutions, sovereignty and political independence. We advocate a speedy election of a new President. It is our deeply held believe that all members of the international community should adhere to such a position.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

I have a number of other requests for the floor on my list of speakers. I therefore intend to suspend this meeting until 3 p.m.

The meeting was suspended at 1 p.m.

United Nations S/PV.5859 (Resumption 1)

Security Council

Sixty-third year

Provisional

5859th meeting

Tuesday, 25 March 2008, 3 p.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Churkin/Mr. Dolgov	(Russian Federation)
Members:	Belgium	Mr. Kenes
	Burkina Faso	Mr. Somdah
	China	Mr. Li Kexin
	Costa Rica	Mr. Weisleder
	Croatia	Mr. Skračić
	France	Mr. Kassianides
	Indonesia	Mr. Natalegawa
	Italy	Mr. Mantovani
	Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	Mr. Mubarak
	Panama	Mr. Arias
	South Africa	Mr. Laher
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Bayley
	United States of America	Ms. Phee
	Viet Nam	Mr. Bui The Giang

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

This record contains the text of speeches delivered in English and of the interpretation of speeches delivered in the other languages. The final text will be printed in the *Official Records of the Security Council*. Corrections should be submitted to the original languages only. They should be incorporated in a copy of the record and sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned to the Chief of the Verbatim Reporting Service, room C-154A.

The meeting resumed at 3.05 p.m.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I wish to remind all speakers that, as I indicated at the morning meeting and in accordance with the understanding reached among members of the Council, they should limit their statements to no more than five minutes in order to expedite the Council's work. Delegations with lengthy statements are kindly requested to circulate their texts in writing and to deliver a condensed version when speaking in the Chamber.

The next speaker on my list is the representative of Lebanon, to whom I give the floor.

Mr. Salam (Lebanon): At the outset, allow me to congratulate you, Mr. President, for your wise stewardship of the Council during this month of March and to extend my deepest appreciation to the Permanent Representative of Panama for his skilful leadership of the Council during the previous month. I also wish to thank the Secretary-General for his important introductory remarks and Mr. Lynn Pascoe, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, for his statement. Once again, it underscored the tremendous challenges that lie ahead.

At the Annapolis Conference, all parties committed themselves anew to the Road Map, with the goal of reaching an agreement on statehood for the Palestinian people before the end of the current year. And what does Phase 1 of the Road Map, which was endorsed by this Council, call for? All present here know that it calls upon Israel to "immediately dismantle settlement outposts erected since March 2001" and "to freeze all settlement activity (including natural growth ...)".

But what has happened since Annapolis?

In December 2007, Israel disclosed a plan to build 307 houses in the occupied territories, in Abu Ghuneim Mountain, a vicinity of East Jerusalem which it calls Har Homa. That decision came only a few days after the resumption of peace talks with the Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, at Annapolis. On 12 February 2008, Israel announced plans to build more than 1100 apartments in occupied East Jerusalem. On 17 March the Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, left no room for doubt about his Government's intentions, stating that Israel would not stop building on occupied land in and around Jerusalem.

On this matter, we cannot but commend Mr. Robert Serry, the United Nations Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, who, in his briefing to this body on 26 February, reiterated the principle that continued settlement activity is illegal anywhere in the occupied territory and is an obstacle to peace. He underlined the fact that settlement activity is "among the biggest factors undermining confidence in the Annapolis process and prospects for a viable Palestinian State". (*S/PV.5846, p. 3)*

We do not intend to disregard the fact that the Road Map in its same Phase 1 calls upon the Palestinians "for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire to end armed activity and all acts of violence against Israelis anywhere". However, could anyone, in good faith, reasonably imagine that the Palestinians could fully conform to such expectations while Israel continues to subject Gaza to an immoral siege and its civilian population to a deliberate policy of collective punishment? This is not to mention the daily raids and incursions it carries out in both Gaza and the West Bank.

These realities, no matter how painful, should not allow despair to prevail. The process initiated by the United States at Annapolis must not be left to erode. Hence, we cannot but support the efforts to hold a second international meeting in Moscow to help achieve a comprehensive and just peace based on United Nations resolutions, the terms of reference of the Madri Peace Conference, the principle of land for peace and the provisions of the Arab Peace Initiative.

Turning to Lebanon, in particular to its south, it is essential to move from the precarious situation of the cessation of hostilities to that of a permanent ceasefire. The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) recently observed the thirtieth anniversary of its presence in Lebanon, a presence initially caused by the massive Israeli invasion of 1978 and which has continued because of repeated Israeli aggressions that culminated in the summer 2006 war leading to Security Council resolution 1701 (2006).

While we express our deep gratitude to UNIFIL and praise its remarkable performance and close cooperation with the Lebanese armed forces, we reiterate on this occasion that Lebanon remains entirely committed to the full implementation of resolution 1701 (2006) and abides by its obligations under it.

Israel, however, has yet to abide by its own obligations under that resolution.

As a matter of fact, the Secretary-General in his latest report on the implementation of resolution 1701 (2006), noted that

> "UNIFIL has observed and reported a significant number of Israeli air violations of Lebanese airspace by aircraft and unmanned aerial vehicles on an almost daily basis. … On 17 February … UNIFIL recorded 36 air violations"

And he rightly concluded that "All Israeli overflights of Lebanon's territory constitute violations of Lebanese sovereignty and of resolution 1701 (2006)." (*S/2008/135, para. 17*)

As to cluster bombs — the deadly legacy of Israel in the south, which kill and maim children, civilians mine-clearance experts, in addition to contaminating agricultural fields — the situation regrettably remains unchanged in spite of repeated calls on behalf of the international community. Israel claims to have submitted information on strike data, but the Secretary-General in his report qualified them as being "of very limited value". (*Ibid., para. 74*)

Regarding the northern part of Ghajar, the Secretary-General considered that its continued occupation by Israel "constitutes a continuing violation of Lebanon's sovereignty, resolution 1701 (2006) and the Blue Line" (*ibid., para. 70*). We reiterate here our support of the proposal that UNIFIL take over, on an interim basis, the administrative and humanitarian responsibilities on the Lebanese side of Ghajar, once the Israeli army has fully withdrawn.

The continued Israeli occupation of the Shab'a Farms remains a major threat to the security and stability of south Lebanon and constitutes a violation of Security Council resolution 425 (1978). On this issue, we urge the Secretary-General to start a long-due diplomatic process, based on our suggestion in the seven-point plan, that this area be placed under provisional United Nations custodianship after the withdrawal of the Israeli occupying forces and until the border demarcation between Lebanon and Syria become possible.

On the question of Lebanese detainees in Israeli prisons, we reiterate that those detentions are a breach of the basic rules of international law and that the prisoners should be released immediately and unconditionally. As for the Israeli soldiers abducted on 12 July 2006, the Lebanese Government reiterates that it has no knowledge of their status or whereabouts and remains ready to cooperate with the Secretary-General.

We also reaffirm that the internationally recognized borders of Lebanon in the south are as referred to in the 1949 Armistice Agreement, and as reiterated in operative paragraph 5 of resolution 1701 (2006). We continue to welcome UNIFIL assistance in marking the Blue Line.

I would also like to inform the Council that Lebanese authorities are maintaining a high level of vigilance against illegal movements of arms and material. In this context, my Government reiterates that the control of Lebanon's northern and eastern borders remains a shared responsibility with Syria, as per resolution 1701 (2006).

As to the Special Tribunal for Lebanon regarding the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and the terrorist acts related to it, we would like to express our appreciation for the sustained efforts of the Secretary-General for its establishment. We also acknowledge the generous contributions made by Member States towards its funding, and we reiterate our strong conviction that this Tribunal will be a key judicial instrument in putting an end to impunity.

Finally, today, 25 March, a new President for Lebanon should have been elected. While the presidential elections have once more been postponed, we cannot but stress the importance for the stability and security of my country of these elections being held as soon as possible in accordance with the terms of the Constitution and pursuant to the Arab Initiative.

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): Mr. President, allow me at the outset to congratulate your friendly country for chairing the work of the Security Council this month. We also would like to express our deep gratitude for the efforts of the Permanent Representative of Panama and the members of his delegation last month. I also wish to express my deep pleasure at seeing the Secretary-General participating with us in the meeting this morning.

The United Nations can no longer deal with the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestinian question on a business-as-usual basis. The Security Council's inability to carry out its obligations cannot be allowed to lead to catastrophic results for our region and its peoples. The United Nations must therefore ensure the implementation of the resolutions it has adopted since its inception, denouncing Israel's occupation of Arab territories, violations of human rights and inhumane practices in contravention of international humanitarian law and the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention.

No preventive diplomacy can succeed unless it addresses the core issues of our region — the Israeli occupation of Arab territories in Palestine, the Golan and southern Lebanon — thereby allowing a just and comprehensive solution based on the resolutions of international legitimacy, specifically resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973), and the Arab peace initiative to be reached. The direct or indirect support of some parties for the ongoing Israeli occupation of Arab territories contravenes the principles and foundations of international law at the expense of the interests of Arabs and Palestinians. It sends the wrong message to Israel that its tactics of occupation, aggression, provocative settlement activities and the forcible annexation of territories enjoy the backing of its supporters. Those parties would do better to urge Israel to fulfil the requirements of peace, which is in the interests of all parties, including those who offer blind support to Israel. The absence of stability in the Middle East and the ensuing continued aggression and escalation will inevitably harm the interests of those parties.

Israeli actions in the occupied Arab territories — including killing, oppression, arrests, deportation, the demolition of homes and the expropriation of territories — can only be described as war crimes, genocide and a holocaust against the Palestinian people. Israel continues to engage in targeted killings, collective punishment and daily massacres of the Palestinian people, especially in the Gaza Strip. The victims, including women and children, number in the thousands. Israel continues to close the border crossings and to make the Gaza Strip the world's largest prison. It continues to deprive the inhabitants of that territory of the basic necessities and to prevent humanitarian assistance, including United Nations aid, from reaching them. Indeed, Israel is exercising its right of self-defence against electricity, water, medicine and food.

All such practices constitute collective punishment and grave violations of international humanitarian law and the Fourth Geneva Convention. They reaffirm once again the fact that Israel is an outlaw State that blatantly flouts international norms, seeks to make the situation explosive, and obstructs any fair, comprehensive and just settlement of the conflict.

The situation in the West Bank is no better than that in Gaza, as reaffirmed by many senior international observers, including Alvaro de Soto, Jean Ziegler, John Dugard and, most recently, the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Mr. John Holmes, during his briefing to the Council last month, in which he noted Israel's ongoing construction of the separation wall in the face of the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, and its continued expansion of settlements, arrests and other actions that are well known to all and have made the lives of Palestinians into a living hell and increased their suffering. The Security Council's inability in recent weeks to adopt a resolution calling for an end to those crimes and Israeli violations is destroying whatever remains of its credibility.

Despite the passage of 40 years since the Israeli occupation of the Syrian Golan began, Israel continues to refuse to return the occupied territory to its motherland, Syria, and to implement the resolutions of international legitimacy, especially resolution 497 (1981). Israel's practices have violated all legal and moral norms in the occupied Syrian Golan, where it pursues a policy of terrorizing and oppressing Syrian citizens and sending them to prisons and detention centres, where some have remained for over 30 years under no legal basis and in potentially lethal circumstances as the occupying authorities continue to ignore their medical needs. In that regard we make specific note of our citizen Bishr al-Maqt. Our Government has pleaded with the Secretary-General and the International Committee of the Red Cross to save his life. In that context, we ask the United Nations and the Security Council to pressure Israel to release those prisoners, including the Syrian journalist Ata Farahat, who was arrested by Israel because of his nationalist journalistic work.

Israel, the occupying Power, continues to prevent the residents of the Syrian Golan from visiting their families and relatives in Syria, their homeland. Israel's policies extend to the very livelihoods of our children in the Golan, making life even more difficult for them. That is quite evident in its policy of uprooting fruit trees, including not least the uprooting of 370 trees of our citizen Majed Fadel-Allah Abou-Awad on 23 February 2008. We informed the members of the Security Council of the details of that most recent Israeli aggression in our letter of 6 March.

There is no doubt that Israel's escalation against the Palestinian people, its forthcoming manoeuvres in the occupied Syrian Golan, its troops massing along the Lebanese border, its intensified settlement activities in occupied Jerusalem, its ongoing construction of the separation wall and assassinations of Palestinians will make the situation in the Middle East, the Arab-Israeli conflict and the question of Palestine priorities on the agenda of the Arab summit shortly to be held in Damascus. The Israeli escalation is intended to have negative repercussions for the summit and to poison the regional atmosphere. Instead of reaching out for the Arab hand extended in peace, Israel has already begun to provoke the capitals of the area, just as it did during the Beirut summit of 2002, when it carried out the Jenin massacre only a few hours after the adoption of the Arab peace initiative.

The upcoming summit meeting to be held in Damascus therefore takes on added significance. The meeting will be an opportunity for Arab leaders to discuss and coordinate their positions. It will be a summit meeting of Arab solidarity to unify Arab perspectives and positions in the face of those Israeli challenges. It will therefore be an especially responsible summit meeting.

Syria has made a strategic choice for a just and comprehensive peace based on the well-known terms of reference for peace and decisions of international legitimacy. That means the return of all occupied Arab territories, including occupied Syrian Golan, to the 4 June 1967 lines, as well as the establishment of an independent Palestinian State with Jerusalem as its capital. The ongoing occupation is a contradiction of peace, which by definition requires mobilizing all the necessary means to end the occupation. The question still before us is this: if the Arab hand that has been extended in peace is not met with a hand extended in peace from the other side, what reason can there be for continuing to extend that Arab hand?

Documenting the terrorism carried out by Israel would require an archive and an entire museum specializing in shedding light on Israel's war crimes and acts of annihilation and ethnic cleansing during its bloody history against Palestinians, Syrians, Lebanese, Egyptians, Jordanians and others. It is astonishing that those who talk about their suffering in the Nazi Holocaust also publicly state their desire to inflict a new holocaust on the Palestinian people — this time, one of Israel's making.

We are not the only ones to say that the Israeli State commits war crimes and crimes of annihilation against Palestinians. Well-known Western officials also share that opinion, including senior international officials of the United Nations itself. Many of them have testified before the Security Council. Former United States President Jimmy Carter has not been the only one to say that Israel practices racial segregation against Palestinians. Before him, Bishop Desmond Tutu, who personally experienced racism, and Special Rapporteurs Jean Ziegler and John Dugard made similar statements.

Israel has the darkest record of violations and attacks against international peacekeeping forces in our region. Its aggression and attacks have been described in the Security Council as deliberate by former Secretary-General Kofi Annan. Israel is the only country in the world with a policy of targeted killing. Moreover, in the budget adopted annually by the Knesset, Israel dedicates funds for a policy that has been internationally condemned. Since its establishment in 1948, Israel has kept that item secret. However, since 2000 Israel has made those appropriations public.

Over time, Israel has violated every border and carried out terrorist operations outside its own territory — beginning in Tunisia and then moving on to Beirut, Cyprus, Iraq and every European capital. The statement by the Israeli representative, which included accusations against my country, was truly ironic, for he completely overlooked his country's official policy of terrorism. Israel introduced that policy to the region even before it was established in Palestine in 1948. Everyone is aware that terrorist groups such as the Stern Gang, the Irgun and the Hagganah killed tens of thousands of Palestinians and forced the displacement of millions from their land. They were also responsible for the assassination in Jerusalem of United Nations envoy Count Bernadotte because his conscience drove him to request a review of the resolution dividing Palestine into two States.

Israel carried out the first act of air piracy in modern history, when it hijacked a Syrian civilian airliner in 1954. In Beirut in 1968, Israel carried out political assassinations of unarmed civilian Palestinian intellectuals. In the 1980s Israel placed bombs in the cars of Palestinian mayors. Israel's aggressive behaviour in the region has led to the establishment of no fewer than five peacekeeping operations. Israel cooperated with the racist apartheid system in South Africa due to the similarities between that regime's doctrine and Israel's policy of ethnic cleansing and racial segregation in occupied Arab territories. Yet more surprising and strange is the fact that Israel bombed the United States spy vessel *Liberty* during the 1967 war, because it was certain that the ship was monitoring orders for the mass execution of Egyptian prisoners in the Sinai. We would also remind the Council that Israel destroyed a Libyan civilian airliner in 1971.

Finally, the statement by the representative of the United States suggesting that my country is interfering in the internal affairs of Lebanon is puzzling, given the blatant round-the-clock interference by the United States in Lebanon's affairs, which is taking place very publicly and openly and without any diplomatic or political constraints. That American interference has resulted in displeasure among large segments of the populations of Lebanon and the region.

Foreign interference in Lebanese affairs cannot serve the cause of Lebanon's stability, security and civil peace. Lebanon very much needs support and encouragement for its national unity, stability, civil peace and political independence, free from external influence or hegemony. Those who care about Lebanon must deal with that country while taking into account the will of the Lebanese people and ensuring Lebanon's integration into its natural Arab environment. They must not jeopardize Lebanon's stability by sending warships to its coasts.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): Before giving the floor to the next speaker, I should like to inform the Council that perhaps there was a mistake in interpretation earlier. The President asked speakers to limit their statements to five minutes, not 15 or 25.

I now give the floor to the representative of the Sudan.

Mr. Mohamad (Sudan) (*spoke in Arabic*): Allow me at the outset to congratulate you, Mr. President, on your accession to the presidency of the Security Council for the month of March, a presidency that has been marked by dynamism and vigour. That, of course, is a reflection of the constructive work of the Russian Federation in the Middle East, as so well illustrated by the visits to the region by your Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov. I also convey my gratitude to your predecessor, the Permanent Representative of Panama, for the outstanding way in which he led our Council last month.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the Secretary-General for his presence here today and for his introductory statement. It would be remiss of us, of course, not to convey our gratitude to the Under-Secretary-General, Mr. Pascoe, for his briefing to the Council.

It is my great honour to address this Council on behalf of the Arab Group, representing the League of Arab States.

This meeting of the Security Council takes place at a time when the deterioration of the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories is well known to all Council members and, in fact, to the international community as a whole. That is due to the obdurate stance taken by Israel and its attempts to extinguish any hope of a just and lasting peace, in particular following the renewed momentum created by the Annapolis Conference.

Indeed, for over four decades now — that is, the duration of the Israeli occupation — the Palestinian people have never ceased to aspire to the creation of an independent Palestinian State, with Jerusalem as its capital and with the return of refugees in conformity with Assembly resolution 194 (III). Israel has always worked to undermine those hopes and to prolong the suffering of the Palestinian people. It has carried out settlement policies and has intimidated the population. That is a systematic policy, which is a clear and brazen violation of existing norms and standards.

Everyone is well aware that the Israeli occupation authorities, on a daily basis and before the eyes of the world, engage in practices that run counter to the provisions of international law, international humanitarian law, the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 and the principles of the Charter of the United Nations. That has been accomplished through acts of aggression against the civilian population and by prohibiting access to basic services and humanitarian assistance, which has led to a serious deterioration of the situation of the Palestinian people, especially in the Gaza Strip. It is compounded by the settlements policy, the continued confiscation of lands and the construction of the separation wall despite the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice.

Not only does Israel destroy the hopes of the Palestinian people for an independent Palestine and a stable Middle East, it also is attacks the credibility of this Organization and its ability to redress wrongs, restore the rights of Palestinian people and restore justice. Through its barbarian policies, it has contributed to weakening the authority and profile of the United Nations, as well as its credibility. All of that is unquestionable.

Faced with the situation in the Middle East — which is the result of Israeli intransigence, its refusal to work towards peace and the persistent threat to international peace and security it causes — the world turns to this Council. The world thus expects this Council to take urgent measures to force Israel to work for peace and to put an end to the bloodshed in Gaza and the West Bank by taking immediate measures to launch a just peace process that would lead to an Israeli withdrawal from the Arab territories occupied in 1967 and allow for the emergence of an independent Palestinian State, with Jerusalem as its capital, in conformity with the principle of land for peace, the Arab Peace Initiative and Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002) and 1515 (2003) and General Assembly resolution 194 (III).

It is high time that the Council disprove the allegations heard worldwide that it is hostage to a number of its members who have taken a certain position regarding the conflict and have backed Israel. It is high time that the Council shoulder its responsibilities and live up to the trust and confidence that people place in it, that is, that it put an end to the daily bloodshed in the Middle East and to the practice of collective punishment, which runs counter to the principles of international law and international humanitarian law and those enshrined in the Charter. That should enable the Palestinian people to enjoy a decent life.

The occupied Syrian Golan continues to suffer under Israeli occupation, as it has since June 1967. The inhabitants of the Golan continue to suffer from the inhuman practices of occupation and annexation, despite resolution 497 (1981). In addition, measures of collective punishment are being carried out against Syrian citizens in the occupied Golan, who reject the occupation and are fighting against it. That is all taking place in brazen violation of international law, the Charter and the Fourth Geneva Convention. As Mr. Pascoe said, the procedures for building settlements in the Syrian Golan are still being carried out — they are still being carried out.

The Arab territories in Lebanon continue to suffer under the yoke of Israeli occupation. Israel is also continuing its maritime, aerial and land-based violations of Lebanon's territory in violation of resolution 1701 (2006). It continues to refuse to provide maps of mine fields and cluster bombs dropped during the conflict in Lebanon in the summer of 2006. The impact of that conflict is still felt by Lebanese citizens to this very day. It falls to this Council to put an immediate end to the Israeli occupation and to work towards a withdrawal of Israel from occupied Arab lands.

Statements made by the members of the international community here today have reaffirmed the support of the international community for the Palestinian people in their fight against the Israeli occupation. The same is true of statements calling for the Council to assume its important role in the maintenance of international peace and stability by taking all measures necessary to restore peace to the Palestinian people and to put an end to collective punishment by forcing Israel to withdraw from all occupied Arab territories.

I hope that this will not just be a repeat of the recent past. The Arab Group calls on this Organization to fully play its rightful role, within the framework of efforts aimed at strengthening the role of the United Nations. We hope that the Secretary-General will participate in the Arab summit to be held at the end of this month in Damascus. We also call for an end to the Israeli occupation, one of the last bastions of colonialism in this century.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I now give the floor to the representative of Pakistan.

Mr. Amil (Pakistan): I have the honour to make this statement on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

The achievement of a durable and comprehensive peace in the Middle East and the centrality of a just and lasting settlement of the core issue of Palestine in that regard is the shared objective of the international community, including this Council. The OIC has a strong and direct interest in the realization of this objective. It is manifested in our long-standing commitment and solidarity with the legitimate cause of the people of Palestine and all other occupied Arab territories. The principled position of the OIC is rooted in its firm conviction in the supremacy of international law, respect for the Charter of the United Nations, in particular the principle of equal rights, self-determination of peoples, and the peaceful resolution of disputes.

The eleventh OIC summit conference, held in Dakar, Senegal, on 13 and 14 March 2008, reaffirmed the centrality of the cause of Al-Quds Al-Sharif for the whole Islamic Ummah. In the Dakar Declaration, the Islamic World reaffirmed its solidarity with the heroic struggle of the Palestinian people to establish their independent State with Al-Quds Al-Sharif as its capital. The summit reiterated its call on Israel to fully comply with the relevant resolutions of the Security Council, to enable the establishment of the independent State of Palestine, to withdraw completely from the occupied Syrian Golan to the borders of 4 June 1967, and to respect Lebanon's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The leaders proclaimed, once again, the common position on the overall settlement of the Palestinian question in accordance with the OIC and United Nations resolutions, the Arab Peace Initiative and the Road Map of the Quartet, within the spirit of the OIC's constant commitment to the Middle East peace process.

The framework for the Middle East peace process is well known. It is based essentially on the relevant resolutions of the United Nations, in particular Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002) and 1515 (2003), and the principle of land for peace. It is Israel's pattern of refusal to comply with these resolutions, which is hindering the achievement of peace and stability in the region. Unfortunately, it is the same behaviour of non-fulfilment of its obligations by Israel that is frustrating the understanding and objectives of recent important initiatives, at Annapolis and Paris, to revive the peace process, to end the occupation and to realize the two-State solution.

This is a tragic state of affairs. The rekindled hope for peace is being dashed by the incessant military onslaught by Israel, the Occupying Power, against the innocent, defenceless and besieged Palestinian civilian population in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, in particular the Gaza Strip.

The excessive and disproportionate use of force by Israel, including strikes by warplanes and ground artillery and targeted extrajudicial killings, among other grave breaches of international law, including humanitarian and human rights law, are a challenge to the conscience of the world community. We are deeply grieved and distressed at the heavy civilian casualties including, women, children and infants, and the trauma being endured by the Palestinian people in the face of widespread destruction.

This wanton use of force, collective punishment and terrorizing of civilian populations by the Occupying Power has no justification whatsoever. The OIC shares the international concern over further deterioration of the already dire humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip caused by the military escalation by Israel and its continuing illegal siege of the Gaza Strip.

Similarly, illegal Israeli actions against the civilian population in the West Bank, including the continuing construction of new settlements and the wall, only fuel the cycle of violence, undermine the steps taken by the Palestinian Authority to establish calm and security, and threaten the prospects of peace.

The international community must respond to this deliberate policy of escalation of the ground situation aimed at derailing the fragile peace process. Israel must be held responsible for its actions and their dangerous consequences for the civilian population in the occupied Palestinian territories.

It is high time to ensure respect for the rule of law by putting an end to the impunity enjoyed by Israel. The OIC supports the call by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon that incidents in which civilians have been killed or injured must be investigated, and accountability must be ensured. The OIC expects urgent follow-up action in that regard.

The Security Council, in particular, must act in a credible, timely and effective manner in fulfilment of its Charter responsibilities to address the threat to international peace and security. The Council cannot remain silent and marginalized as this crisis escalates, undermining international law, the sanctity of civilian life and the vision of a just, lasting and comprehensive peace enshrined in the Council's own resolutions.

It is unfortunate and unacceptable for the Security Council to be deadlocked on even pronouncing itself in response to violence and deterioration of the situation on ground. The Council must condemn the killing of innocent civilians and violence, undertake measures to bring about an immediate ceasefire and its respect by all parties, ensure full compliance by Israel, the Occupying Power, with its obligations under international law, including humanitarian and human rights law, and demand an immediate end to the siege of the Gaza Strip.

Going beyond these crucial immediate steps, the Council must play its rightful strategic role in the pursuit of a comprehensive and durable peace in the Middle East. It must demonstrate the political will to ensure full and non-discriminatory implementation of its own resolutions and to respond effectively to non-compliance. It must reclaim its position as the focal point of international efforts, and promote synergy among different initiatives and the political, security and humanitarian tracks. The Council must be the principal guarantor of the understandings and agreements entered into by the parties, including their respective obligations under the Road Map, the implementation of which it must also oversee.

The Security Council should thus make concerted efforts to bring about a rapid and tangible improvement of the situation on ground in the occupied territories, including through the release of prisoners and removal of all kinds of blockades and restrictions. It must ensure cessation of all policies and actions by Israel that seek to change the realities on the ground that could prejudice a final settlement, including the integrity and viability of the future Palestinian State. Israel must halt the construction of the illegal separation wall, freeze all settlement activity and dismantle unauthorized settler outposts.

The Council should ensure immediate and unfettered provision of adequate humanitarian assistance and of all essential goods and services in the occupied territories, in addition to enhanced economic, social and technical support from the international community, including for building State institutions and a security apparatus for the Palestinian Authority.

Peace is indivisible. That is why the summit conference in Dakar, while reiterating the demand that the situation on the ground in the Gaza Strip be restored to what existed prior to the events of June 2007, once again stressed the need for national dialogue among the Palestinians to achieve reconciliation and restore unity in order to serve the Palestinian people's higher national interests. We call on the international community to fully support the ongoing efforts for intra-Palestinian unity and welcome the breakthrough achieved in Sana'a.

The key to success in resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict is in addressing its root cause, namely, the continuing Israeli occupation of the Arab territories. That is the leitmotif of the peace process, of which no aberration or unilateral alteration will be acceptable to the international community. The OIC calls for Israel's complete withdrawal from the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, and all other occupied Arab territories, including the Syrian Golan.

Comprehensive peace in the Middle East will remain elusive unless all aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict are addressed, including the Syria-Israel and Lebanon-Israel tracks. We therefore urge progress on those parallel tracks to reach a just and durable settlement. Israel must withdraw completely from Lebanese land and the occupied Syrian Golan and comply fully with Security Council resolution 497 (1981).

The OIC reaffirms its steadfast support to the Palestinian people for the realization of their inalienable right to self-determination and the establishment of a sovereign, independent and viable State of Palestine on the basis of the pre-1967 borders, with Al-Quds Al-Sharif as its capital, and for a just resolution of the refugee issue in accordance with General Assembly resolution 194 (III).

It was in keeping with our sincere commitment to that larger goal that, despite recent setbacks and the negative developments in the occupied territories, the OIC summit in Dakar welcomed the revival of the peace process and called for building on the momentum in order to reach a final settlement agreement before the end of 2008. It called also for the establishment of an independent and viable Palestinian State. The OIC is ready and willing to work with the international community and the Security Council to realize this collective objective.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I now give the floor to the representative of Cuba.

Mr. Malmierca Díaz (Cuba) (*spoke in Spanish*): I have the honour to address the Security Council on behalf of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries.

At the outset, I would like to thank Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for having been present here this morning for our debate. I also would like to thank Under-Secretary-General Lynn Pascoe for his briefing.

As is known, the situation in the occupied Palestinian territory continues to deteriorate, marked by deadly violence, instability and high tension. In grave breach of international law and in contradiction of the peace process, Israel, the occupying Power, continues, inter alia, to launch military attacks against the Palestinian people in the occupied Palestinian territory, particularly in the Gaza Strip. It continues to expand its illegal settlements and to construct the wall in the West Bank, including in and around occupied East Jerusalem. It also continues to impose closures and restrictions on movement, including via the siege of the Gaza Strip, where the isolated and imprisoned Palestinian civilian population continues to suffer from a dire humanitarian crisis. At the same time, the situation in Lebanon remains complex, and the Israeli occupation of the Syrian Golan continues.

All of these realities affect not only the Middle East region, but the entire international community, for they seriously impact the prospects for peace, security and stability both in and beyond the region.

While aware of the recent efforts to advance the cause of peace, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) strongly believes that the lack of respect for international law by the occupying Power and its ongoing illegal occupation continue to be the major obstacles to the success of efforts to achieve a just, lasting and comprehensive peace. The Movement reiterates its deep regret that for more than 40 years the Palestinian people have been suffering under the brutal Israeli military occupation and colonization of their land since 1967 and that they continue to be denied their fundamental human rights, including the inalienable right to self-determination and the right of the Palestine refugees to return to their lands, in accordance with international law and relevant United Nations resolutions.

The toll in human lives, injured, displaced, homeless, impoverished and those without access to basic services in the occupied Palestinian territory continues to increase at an alarming rate. The poverty rate is currently 65.8 per cent in the occupied Palestinian territory, and in the Gaza Strip it is more than 79 per cent of the population. The continuing Israeli closures and restrictions on freedom of movement and on access to persons and goods, including humanitarian and medical goods, have made the Palestinian economic recovery nearly impossible and continue to aggravate the prevailing humanitarian crisis and to further destabilize the situation on the ground. Such violent and illegal actions have deepened the suffering of the innocent and defenceless Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip, who are already suffering great poverty because of the continuing imposition of the crippling Israeli siege and the ensuing humanitarian crisis.

Moreover, Israel, in violation of numerous Security Council and General Assembly resolutions, in contravention of the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice and of General Assembly resolution ES-10/15 of 20 July 2004 — which reaffirms the illegality of the construction of the wall in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem — continues to build the wall and to impose an associated permit regime and to construct and expand its illegal settlements.

The NAM remains seriously concerned by Israel's recent decisions to continue the illegal construction of settlements and the wall. We are also concerned by the great physical, economic and social devastation caused by those illegal and destructive colonization practices, which are dividing the occupied Palestinian territory into separate, walled-in enclaves and severing East Jerusalem from the rest of the territory, undermining the unity, integrity and contiguity of the Palestinian territory. Furthermore, this construction destroys entire communities, displacing thousands of Palestinian civilians and isolating tens of thousands more Palestinians into isolated cantons.

The continuation of those illegal actions threatens the prospects for peace, as they will make the two-State solution and peace physically impossible to achieve. This requires the urgent attention of the Security Council, for the extremely negative consequences for the peace process are undeniable.

The peace process is not a sideline to the situation on the ground. Just as positive actions and progress in the peace process can benefit the aforementioned situations, the negative events and illegal actions by Israel have a very detrimental impact not only the situation on the ground, but the peace process itself.

The NAM reiterates its call for Israel, the occupying Power, to cease all its violations against the Palestinian people in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, and to abide scrupulously by its obligations under international law, particularly humanitarian law and human rights norms.

The Government of Lebanon has continuously endeavoured to stabilize the situation in its territory following Israel's brutal aggression and serious violations of its territorial integrity and sovereignty. The NAM reiterates its satisfaction with the steps undertaken by the Lebanese Government to implement Security Council resolution 1701 (2006), particularly through the deployment of the Lebanese armed forces in the region south of the Litani River and along the Blue Line. The Movement also welcomes the deployment of the Lebanese armed forces along the northern and eastern borders of Lebanon in order to ensure security and stability at the borders.

The NAM remains deeply concerned by Israel's ongoing air and land violations of the Blue Line in breach of resolution 1701 (2006). We strongly call on Israel to end the occupation of the northern part of Ghajar, on the northern side of the Blue Line, and to immediately refrain from any violation of Lebanese sovereignty and of resolution 1701 (2006), as well as to refrain from any provocation of the Lebanese armed forces or the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon.

The NAM calls for the prompt settlement of the question of the Shab'a Farms in full respect for Lebanese territorial integrity, as stipulated in resolution 1701 (2006). We call upon all parties to cooperate in protecting Lebanon's sovereign rights in that area, and we note the important endeavours of the Secretary-General in this regard.

The NAM is acutely aware of the enormous challenge facing Lebanon as a result of the 1.2 million cluster bombs launched by Israel during its attack on Lebanon in 2006. The Movement once again condemns the use of such weaponry by Israel and deplores the death toll resulting from them. The NAM strongly calls upon Israel to provide the exact location of those deadly weapons and the maps of landmines planted during its occupation of southern Lebanon.

The Non-Aligned Movement expresses its support for the integrated plan of action contained in the statement on Lebanon issued by the foreign ministers of the Arab League on 5 January, and in that regard the Movement commends the efforts by the Secretary General of the Arab League to carry out that plan.

The Movement reaffirms that all measures and actions taken or to be taken by Israel, the occupying Power, which purport to alter the legal, physical and demographic condition and institutional structure of the occupied Syrian Golan, as well as the Israeli measures to impose jurisdiction and administration there, are null, void and without legal effect.

We also reaffirm that all those measures and actions, including the illegal construction and expansion of the Israeli settlements in the Syrian Golan since 1967, constitute violations of international law, international agreements, the United Nations Charter and resolutions, including Security Council resolution 497 (1981), the Fourth Geneva Convention, and a challenge to the international community. The Movement demands that Israel abide by resolution 497 (1981) and withdraw completely from the occupied Syrian Golan to the borders of 4 June 1967.

The Non-Aligned Movement expresses its hope that current efforts will ultimately bring an end to the occupation of all of the Arab territories occupied by Israel since 1967 — the Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem, and the occupied Syrian Golan — and will lead to the establishment of the independent State of Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital, as well as a just solution of the question of refugees on the basis of General Assembly resolution 194 (III). The Movement also hopes that recent international efforts will effectively contribute to the achievement of a comprehensive, just and lasting settlement in the Middle East, based on the relevant United Nations resolutions and in accordance with the rules and principles of international law.

The Non-Aligned Movement reaffirms its support for the Middle East peace process on the basis of Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 425 (1978), 1397 (2002) and 1515 (2003) and the principle of land for peace. Likewise, we reject attempts to alter the mandate of the peace process and the imposition of unilateral measures and strategies aimed at the imposition by Israel, the occupying Power, of an illegal unilateral solution.

The Non-Aligned Movement will continue to support and contribute in all possible ways to the achievement of a just, comprehensive and lasting peace in the Middle East based on all relevant United Nations resolutions, the Arab peace initiative and the road map.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I call on the representative of Slovenia.

Ms. Štiglic (Slovenia): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union (EU).

The candidate countries Turkey, Croatia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; the countries of the Stabilisation and Association Process and potential candidates Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia; the European Free Trade Association country Iceland, member of the European Economic Area; as well as Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Armenia align themselves with this statement.

First of all, let me thank you, Sir, for convening this debate. I would also like to thank Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for his remarks earlier today and Under-Secretary-General Pascoe for his briefing and frank assessment of the situation.

The European Union expresses its full support for the Annapolis process and its commitment to supporting the parties in their negotiations with a view to achieving a two-State solution. A just and sustainable solution to all aspects of the Middle East peace process can be achieved only through negotiation. Despite the difficulties that the process has recently experienced, the EU welcomes the intention of the parties to resume their negotiations and looks forward to an early meeting of Quartet principals.

The EU is deeply concerned about the recent violence in Gaza and southern Israel, especially the civilian casualties. It condemns in the strongest terms the terrorist attack on a seminary in Jerusalem on 6 March and the continued rocket attacks. While recognizing Israel's legitimate right to self-defence, the EU calls for an immediate end to all acts of violence.

The EU stresses the need for swift and tangible results on the ground in order to sustain negotiations. Action from both sides to implement their road map obligations is vital in order to retain the confidence and support of the Israeli and Palestinian populations, the region and the wider international community.

The EU is deeply concerned about the recent Israeli announcement that it intends to extend the settlement of Givat Ze'ev. The EU reiterates that settlement-building anywhere in the occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem, is illegal under international law. Settlement activity prejudges the outcome of final status negotiations and threatens the viability of an agreed two-State solution. The EU therefore urges Israel to take immediate action, in particular on settlements and outposts. It calls on the Palestinian Authority to make further efforts to implement its obligations with regard to security, where needed in cooperation with the Israeli authorities. In that regard, the EU remains ready to strengthen and extend its Police Mission for the Palestinian Territories in order to support the reinforcement and reform of the Palestinian security forces.

The EU considers that the violent confrontations in and around Gaza have serious security implications. The EU is deeply concerned by the unsustainable humanitarian situation in Gaza and calls for the controlled and sustained reopening of all crossings in and out of Gaza for both humanitarian reasons and commercial flows. While reconfirming in that context the Council conclusions of January 2008, it extends its full support to efforts to facilitate a peaceful solution to the present crisis. That solution should provide for a lasting period of quiet. The EU reiterates its readiness to resume its monitoring mission at Rafah, in accordance with the Agreement on Movement and Access of November 2005.

The EU recalls its commitment at the International Donors' Conference for the Palestinian State last December in Paris to support efforts to build the future Palestinian State, in accordance with the Palestinian Reform and Development Plan. It calls for Israeli cooperation in the Plan's implementation. The EU expresses its full support for the upcoming international conferences on investments and economic revival in Bethlehem and in support of Palestinian civil police and rule of law in Berlin.

The EU continues to stand by its strong support for the Government and institutions of Lebanon in carrying out their missions to preserve Lebanon's stability, sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. The EU expresses concern about the ongoing political deadlock in Lebanon and the deterioration of the security situation.

The EU reiterates its strong support for the plan unanimously adopted by the Arab foreign ministers in seeking to broker a resolution to the political crisis and commends the continued efforts by Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa. It urges the parties in Lebanon to proceed, as a first step, to the immediate holding of the presidential election. The success of the plan requires all actors to play a constructive role. The EU recalls that the EU High Representative has been designated to spearhead the EU efforts with Arab countries in that respect.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I call on the representative of Israel to make a further statement.

Mr. Gillerman (Israel): While I share the view expressed by some members of the Council as to the value of these debates, I feel that, at the end of this meeting, I would be remiss if I did not express our gratitude to the assassins of Damascus and the butchers of the Sudan — both beacons of human rights — for their expert presentations on terror and genocide. It was indeed enlightening to hear a lecture about targeted killings from a country under investigation by this very Council for assassinating its own political opponents in Lebanon, as well as about genocide from the monsters of Darfur. Maybe this meeting did serve some purpose after all.

As to the statement made by the Cuban representative, ostensibly speaking on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement, I find it strange and disturbing, just as I did the last time. While we heard here today from several representatives of countries that are members of the Movement a clear condemnation of terror, and especially of the massacre in Jerusalem on 6 March, there was not a single word about terror nor was there a condemnation of that brutal act in the statement made by the representative of Cuba on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement. It is precisely because we hear such very different statements from countries belonging to the Movement, both around this table and outside the Chamber, and precisely because of our deep respect for so many of the members of the Non-Aligned Movement, that we wonder whether the representative of Cuba spoke on behalf of his own island. If not, whom does he really represent? I believe that both the Council and the Non-Aligned Movement deserve an explanation.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): The representative of the Syrian Arab Republic has asked for the floor to make an additional statement. I now give him the floor.

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): I apologize for taking the floor once again. I shall be very brief, for I have already made a lengthy statement.

Perhaps had the Council met its responsibilities in the course of the decades of the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, we would not be at a point at which a Member State is requesting that this item be removed from the agenda, or one at which some people would feel uncomfortable listening to the representative of a country asking for an end to the occupation of its territory that has existed since 1967.

My country is a founding Member State of this international Organization. We consider ourselves to be among the victors in the war against Nazism and fascism. While there are fortunately many things that set us apart from the Israelis, a relevant distinguishing feature in the context of our discussion today is the fact that a permanent member of the Council has not had to use the veto 44 times to protect our efforts because of evasion of responsibilities under international law and the principles and objectives of the Charter. However, the State to which I am referring did use the veto 44 times to protect Israel as it evaded its commitments under the Charter and international law. It is for that reason that the representative of Israel been able to criticize various States, for he knows in advance that there is some one to protect him in the Council, even if it means using what is referred to as the privilege of the veto.

I shall summarize the mentality of the representative of Israel by recalling a story told by an Israeli dove. Speaking about Israel's disregard for the rights of others, that Israeli advocate of peace gave the following account, which has something to do with your country, Mr. President. The story goes as follows. At one point in the war between czarist Russia and Ottoman Turkey, a Russian citizen of the Jewish faith was conscripted into the army. He was sent to the Ottoman Turkish front, where the war was then taking place between czarist Russia and the Ottoman Empire. As he was preparing to join the forces at the front, his mother said to him, "My son, each time you kill a Turk you must rest for a few minutes". The boy was surprised by her statement and said to her, "But mother, what if a Turkish soldier were to kill me?" His mother replied, "God damn that Turkish soldier, my son! Why would he want to kill you? What could you have done to him to cause him to want to kill you?"

That is the Israeli mentality, one that allows for the killing and accusing of others while proclaiming its own innocence. However, it is all of us in the region who suffer from Israel's occupation, aggression, inhumanity and evasion of its commitments and the terms of reference for peace.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): The representative of the Sudan has requested the floor to make an additional statement. I now give him the floor.

Mr. Mohamad (Sudan) (*spoke in Arabic*): We were not surprised that the representative of the Zionist entity fled the Chamber following his attack against my country. We were also not surprised by his baseless allegations, which are a reflection of his moral bankruptcy. Nor were we surprised by his reference to Darfur, for we know of Israel's covert influence in that region.

The comments by the representative of the Zionist entity regarding occupied Palestine also ring hollow. They were an attempt to cover up his country's crimes against humanity and its violations of the rights of the Palestinian people. The Zionist entity has undermined the credibility of the United Nations, which has been unable to put an end to Israel's occupation of Palestine. That is the real tragedy.

Given the steadfastness of the Palestinian people and of peace-loving countries, we are confident that Palestine's independence will be achieved, just as apartheid came to an end in South Africa. We say to the representative of the Zionist entity: say what you like; the fig leaf with which you clothe yourself will not serve to hide your crimes, nor will you enjoy impunity.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): The representative of Cuba has asked for the floor to make an additional statement. I now give him the floor.

Mr. Quiñones Sánchez (Cuba) (*spoke in Spanish*): It really was never the intention of my delegation to take the floor for a second time in this debate. However, I believe it necessary and timely to respond to the deceptive comments made by the representative of Israel with regard to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and its firm position regarding the cause of the heroic Palestinian people and the situation in the Middle East.

First, I would like to emphasize that the Cuban delegation makes this statement in its capacity as Chair of the NAM Coordinating Bureau. You can be sure, Mr. President, that we could have included many more elements in our national capacity.

This is not the first time that the Israeli representative has made offensive and distorted statements with regard to the position of the Movement on the issue before us today. I would like to make it clear to the representative of Israel that the speech read out in the Chamber by Cuba's representative just a few minutes ago represents the opinion of the 118 members of the Movement.

Israel is once again attempting to divert attention from truly important issues and to hide the facts about the daily occurrences in the occupied Arab territories, especially the crimes committed in the Palestinian territory. Distortion and manipulation will not prevent the Non-Aligned Movement from setting out its principled position on the situation in Palestine and the Middle East in all the relevant international forums, including the Security Council.

The Non-Aligned Movement will continue to express its resolute opposition to the illegal Israeli occupation, as well as its full support for the establishment of an independent Palestinian State, with East Jerusalem as its capital, throughout the entirety of the Palestinian territory occupied by Israel. We shall continue to denounce the occupying Power's non-respect for international law as the main obstacle to the success of the efforts intended to achieve a comprehensive, just and lasting peace.

We shall continue to demand that Israel withdraw fully from the occupied Syrian Golan to the 4 June 1967 borders. We shall not be silent on the issue of Israel's relentless aggression and its grave violations of Lebanon's sovereignty and territorial integrity. We hope that, at some point, the Government of Israel will demonstrate genuine political commitment to making progress in the peace process — not just with rhetoric, but with concrete actions.

As it always has, the Non-Aligned Movement will continue to firmly support the peace process in the Middle East on the basis of resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 425 (1978), 1397 (2002) and 1515 (2003) and the principle of land for peace.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): There are no further speakers inscribed on my list. The Security Council has thus concluded the present stage of its consideration of the item on its agenda.

The meeting rose at 4.35 p.m.

United Nations **S/PV.5860**

Security Council

Sixty-third year

Provisional

5860th meeting

Wednesday, 26 March 2008, 10 a.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Churkin	(Russian Federation)
Members:	Belgium	Mr. Verbeke
	Burkina Faso	Mr. Kafando
	China	Mr. Liu Zhenmin
	Costa Rica	Ms. Villalobos
	Croatia	Mr. Vilović
	France	Mr. De Rivière
	Indonesia	Mr. Kleib
	Italy	Mr. Spatafora
	Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	Mr. Ettalhi
	Panama	Mr. Arias
	South Africa	Mr. Kumalo
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. McKenzie Smity
	United States of America	Mr. DeLaurentis
	Viet Nam	Mr. Hoang Chi Trung

Agenda

The situation in Guinea-Bissau

Report of the Secretary-General on developments in Guinea-Bissau and on the activities of the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office in that country (S/2008/181)

This record contains the text of speeches delivered in English and of the interpretation of speeches delivered in the other languages. The final text will be printed in the *Official Records of the Security Council*. Corrections should be submitted to the original languages only. They should be incorporated in a copy of the record and sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned to the Chief of the Verbatim Reporting Service, room C-154A.

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in Guinea-Bissau

Report of the Secretary-General on developments in Guinea-Bissau and on the activities of the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office in that country (S/2008/181)

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I should like to inform the Council that I have received a letter from the representative of Guinea-Bissau, in which he requests to be invited to participate in the consideration of the item on the Council's agenda. In conformity with the usual practice, I propose, with the consent of the Council, to invite that representative to participate in the consideration of the item without the right to vote, in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Charter and rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

At the invitation of the President, Mr. Cabral (Guinea-Bissau) took a seat at the Council table.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to the Representative of the Secretary-General for Guinea-Bissau and Head of the United Nations Peace-building Support Office in Guinea-Bissau, Mr. Shola Omoregie.

It is so decided.

I invite Mr. Omoregie to take a seat at the Council table.

In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure an invitation to the Chair of the Guinea-Bissau configuration of the Peacebuilding Commission and Permanent Representative of Brazil, Mrs. Maria Luiza Ribeiro Viotti.

It is so decided.

At the invitation of the President, Mrs. Viotti (Brazil), took a seat at the Council table.

The President: The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

The Security Council is meeting today in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

Members of the Council have before them document S/2008/181, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on developments in Guinea-Bissau and on the activities of the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office in that country.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear briefings by the representative of the Secretary-General and head of the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office in Guinea-Bissau, Mr. Shola Omoregie, and the Chair of the Guinea-Bissau configuration of the Peacebuilding Commission, Mrs. Maria Luiza Ribeiro Viotti.

I give the floor to the representative of the Secretary-General and head of the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office in Guinea-Bissau, Mr. Shola Omoregie.

Mr. Omoregie: Mr. President, the report before the Council, contained in document S/2008/181, is the thirtieth report of the Secretary-General on developments in Guinea-Bissau and on the activities of the United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office in that country (UNOGBIS).

The report focuses in particular on developments linked to the mobilization of resources and the increased engagement of international partners with Guinea-Bissau. Of particular note are the signing of the agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in January for Emergency Post-Conflict Assistance and the launch, also in January, of the Peacebuilding Commission's engagement in Guinea-Bissau.

I would like to say just a few words now to update the Council on developments that have taken place since the report was published. In this regard, I would like to start on a happy note.

Last night, President João Bernardo Vieira, who had heretofore been evasive on the subject of the date of the country's next legislative elections, announced that the elections will be held on 16 November 2008. This announcement, on the eve of this meeting of the

Security Council, will no doubt significantly reduce the tensions that have been building in the country in the past few days.

Meanwhile, preparations for the forthcoming legislative elections are moving forward very slowly. It was only recently that the Government opted for the biometric voter identity card registration process. Its decision was backed on 16 March by the parties signatory to the Political and Government Stability Pact on which the Government is based. A voter registration exercise involving the issuing of biometric cards would take five to six months. The voter registration exercise, which should have been carried out in January and February, is still behind schedule, mainly because of the impasse over arrears from previous elections estimated at $1.7 million which should have been paid to the national and regional electoral commissions.

On 9 March, the Central Committee of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC) declared null and void the decision taken by its leader, Carlos Gomes Jr., on 29 February, to withdraw political confidence in Prime Minister N'Dafa Cabi, who is the Third Vice-President of the PAIGC. The Central Committee's decision and support by the two other members of the Stability Pact alleviated disquiet among national and international actors that uncertainty over Mr. Cabi's position might have an impact on the positive momentum of the cooperation activities with the international community currently under way.

The PAIGC will be electing a new leader at its Congress which will take place from 3 to 6 April. The outcome of this contest will determine whether this current momentum will be sustained or seriously undermined.

The Peacebuilding Commission and the Government, with support from UNOGBIS and the United Nations country team, are working closely to prepare short-term projects for early funding from the Peacebuilding Fund, within the framework of a peacebuilding priority plan for Guinea-Bissau. In this initial phase, the projects implemented help build the confidence of national partners, yield immediate and visible dividends in the process of peace consolidation, and serve as a catalyst or impetus for the medium- to long-term assistance that will be provided by the Peacebuilding Commission under the wider umbrella of the strategic framework for peacebuilding in Guinea-Bissau.

The National Assembly passed the amnesty bill after a second reading on 4 March. It will now be submitted to President Vieira for ratification. This law is seen by its proponents as facilitating reconciliation and paving the way for security sector reform, and President Vieira and the military worked very hard for its passage.

The census of active personnel in the armed forces, funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), ended on 19 March. The data, which are being processed and are expected to be ready by the end of this month, will inform decisions on the scope of future demobilization and retirement programmes. The census is a precondition for the full support of donors for the security sector reform. A census of veterans and security bodies will also need to be conducted.

On 17 March, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) organized, with financing by the Government of the United Kingdom, a consultation on security sector reform for the Security Sector Reform Steering Committee, which includes the United Nations and key multilateral and bilateral donors as members. The purpose of the consultation was to raise security sector knowledge capacity and assess the need for updating of the Government's security sector reform strategy. Its conclusions focused on the need to update the strategy in order to enhance efforts to combat narcotics and organized crime, strengthen national capacity, increase the role of non-State actors and devise an effective communication and awareness strategy.

The OECD followed that consultation with two days of consultations with the Technical Coordinating Committee on 18 and 20 March. These consultations focused on raising capacity and applying best practices to security sector reform in the Guinea-Bissau context. The consultation exercises identified the following challenges to security sector reform implementation.

First, there is a weak parliamentary oversight and control system. Second, there is a need for better aid coordination. Third, national capacity-building is required in key sectors. Fourth, there is a lack of support for civil society organizations. Fifth, a coherent communication and sensitization policy on security sector reform is lacking. And, finally, there is a need to link security sector reform more coherently with the national anti-narcotics and poverty reduction strategy frameworks.

To conclude, I would like to highlight some key points.

First, the first quarter of 2008 has seen strong activity that illustrates the tangible progress by the Government in engaging the international community. In particular, the arrival of missions from the Peacebuilding Commission and of teams of technical assistants from the European Union, particularly in connection with the security sector reform, is creating expectations among the population of tangible peace dividends.

Change management is a long and delicate process in which expectations must be managed. A failure to manage these expectations would result in disillusionment that might ultimately jeopardize the long-term commitment necessary for implementing these reforms.

There is also a danger that the upsurge in donor activity may mask the reality that Government poverty reduction and security sector reform strategies are still massively underfunded. The international community therefore needs to remain engaged. While we are all aware that security sector reform is a key structural requirement, Guinea-Bissau continues to face massive social problems that need urgent solutions. It is important that the international community also earmark assistance so that the Government may implement its poverty reduction strategy.

We must acknowledge the need for better donor coordination in all sectors receiving overseas development assistance. The need to strengthen the existing coordination structure is particularly evident in the security sector in view of the arrival of various technical assistance teams to assist with the reform of that sector.

As a follow-up, it may be necessary for the donors to consider creating a multi-donor security sector reform trust fund in order to ensure a strategic coherence, identify gaps and develop a common donor vision. I have already informed partners that I intend to submit proposals to enhance our coordination efforts in the country.

I have also sought the cooperation of other departments and donors to map out the various security sector activities in Guinea-Bissau, with a view to articulating possible value-added roles for the United Nations and non-United Nations entities involved in supporting the police and other law enforcement agencies of the country.

Depending on the outcome of a mapping resource meeting at headquarters here in April, I envision the possibility of a multicomponent assessment mission to Guinea-Bissau in the near future to evaluate the situation on the ground and identify the nature of any assistance that could be rendered. The Council would be informed of the outcome of the assessment mission.

The legislative elections are a key benchmark on the level of democratic maturity in the country. It is disappointing that preparations for the elections have been impeded because of resource problems, particularly with regard to arrears from previous elections. President Vieira wants to be sure that all conditions are met in order that elections are financially, technically and politically feasible.

Now that President Vieira has announced the date of the elections, it is important that the country's partners provide resources to enable elections to be held in November and to prevent the national stakeholders from using the lack of funds as a pretext not to move forward.

Finally, the Government of Guinea-Bissau is very concerned about the emerging threat of terrorism in the country. The recent case in January, in which two Mauritanian nationals were arrested in Bissau in connection with the murder of four French tourists in Mauritania and the subsequent threats of reprisals against Guinea-Bissau have led to concern by authorities that there is a terrorist threat in the country.

The Government has requested international assistance to strengthen its capacity to control its borders in order to combat this emerging threat. The arrest of the Mauritanians was an example of coordinated criminal intelligence exchange between the authorities of Senegal and Guinea-Bissau and also demonstrates the risk posed by porous borders. Subregional cooperation should be encouraged and supported in addressing the threats of terrorism especially in a region with porous borders.

The President: I now give the floor to the Chair of the Guinea-Bissau Configuration of the

Peacebuilding Commission, Mrs. Maria Luiza Ribeiro Viotti.

Mrs. Ribeiro Viotti (Brazil): I would like to thank you for the invitation to address the Security Council on the current situation in Guinea-Bissau and to inform on the progress made by the Peacebuilding Commission in support of peacebuilding efforts in that country.

Following the recommendation of the Council, the Organizational Committee of the Peacebuilding Commission agreed to place the country on the Commission's agenda. A country-specific configuration for Guinea-Bissau was created, which I have the honour to chair. The objective of our work is to assess the main challenges and priorities for peacebuilding, in close contact with the authorities of Guinea-Bissau as well as to launch a strategic framework to address the most critical peacebuilding issues in the country.

Soon after the establishment of the country-specific configuration, I conducted an exploratory mission to Guinea-Bissau. The field visit had the objective of getting first-hand information on the current situation in the country and to initiate a dialogue with the Government and relevant stakeholders on the priorities for peacebuilding.

The mission also aimed at explaining the purpose and the process of the engagement of the Peacebuilding Commission with the country and at ensuring that the principle of country ownership is observed from the very beginning of the process.

During my visit, I had a discussion with the Prime Minister and met the Foreign Minister, the Secretary of State for International Cooperation, the Ministers of Finance, Economy, Justice, Interior, and Defence and the Minister of the Presidency, the Army Chief of Staff, representatives of civil society organizations, members of the diplomatic community resident in or accredited to Guinea-Bissau and the United Nations country team.

I left the country with the impression that there was a general expectation that the Peacebuilding Commission can be a turning point in the political and economic transition in Guinea-Bissau. In particular, the Government was looking forward to engagement with the Peacebuilding Commission as a catalyst for increased international support and for sustained international attention to assist the country in consolidating peace and promoting development.

While in Bissau, I had the opportunity of witnessing the distress and adverse living conditions of the population, which threaten ongoing efforts to sustain peace and stability. On the other hand, as many authorities emphasized, the country has a great potential and is confident that, with international support, it will be able to attain political stability and sustained economic growth.

After I reported the results of my visit, the country-specific meeting on Guinea-Bissau had the opportunity to undertake a discussion based on a mapping of resources and gaps for peacebuilding in Guinea-Bissau. This exercise proved to be extremely useful in highlighting the various programmes undertaken in the country and the situation of aid flows as well as in identifying funding gaps within existing strategies and challenges not covered by any existing strategy.

The discussion was complemented by an examination of the situation of Guinea-Bissau on the basis of a background paper prepared by the Peacebuilding Support Office, as well as by the consideration of a draft outline for the strategic framework for peacebuilding in Guinea-Bissau.

A high-level delegation of the Government of Guinea-Bissau, headed by Prime Minister Martinho N'Dafa Cabi, travelled to New York and made a presentation to the Peacebuilding Commission on the country's priorities and challenges for peacebuilding. The Representative of the Secretary-General in Guinea-Bissau, Mr. Shola Omoregie, also addressed the meeting. The presence at United Nations Headquarters of such a high-level delegation was a clear demonstration of the importance that the Government attaches to ongoing peacebuilding initiatives and illustrated once again its willingness to work together with the Commission towards consolidating peace and stability.

On the day of the visit, the country-specific meeting unanimously decided to advise the Secretary-General to declare Guinea-Bissau eligible for support from the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund. I conveyed that decision to the Secretary-General, who, in turn, officially announced the eligibility of Guinea-Bissau for Peacebuilding Fund support. The declaration of eligibility triggered the process of establishing a national steering committee in Guinea-Bissau, which will be in charge of analysing the specific projects to be financed with resources from the Peacebuilding Fund.

Following my field mission to Guinea-Bissau, the presentation by the Prime Minister, the various interactions with the Government and the preliminary discussions in the Commission, the country-specific meeting has been gaining a better understanding of the priorities for peacebuilding.

The challenges in the country include the areas identified by the Security Council, that is, building governmental capacity, promoting public sector reform, strengthening the rule of law, combating drug trafficking, implementing security sector reform and assisting the electoral process. Challenges also include the recurrent problem of salary arrears, improving the living conditions of the military, combating drug trafficking and organised crime, promoting human resources development and youth employment, addressing the needs of the vulnerable groups, rehabilitating the infrastructure, in particular the energy sector, and adopting measures to jump-start the revival of the economy.

In setting a strategic framework for peacebuilding, the PBC will now define the specific mix of measures and the sequencing of the actions it will undertake within each of the priority areas to support existing strategies and programmes, identify gaps and generate synergies among programmes, taking into account the progress achieved thus far in each of the peacebuilding priority areas. It is widely acknowledged that a key to addressing peacebuilding challenges in the country is the need to strengthen the Government's capacity to break the vicious circle in which institutional, political and economic instability are intricately linked.

The Peacebuilding Commission intends to tackle peacebuilding in Guinea-Bissau through a two-track approach, interweaving immediate projects and rapid actions with medium- and long-term perspectives. There is growing recognition that, given the daunting array of challenges that Guinea-Bissau faces, peacebuilding priorities should be ranked according to the degree of urgency, importance and value added to peace consolidation efforts.

The strategic framework will outline the commitments of the Government of Guinea-Bissau and those of the various stakeholders, including civil society, the private sector, political parties, the United Nations system, the members of the Peacebuilding Commission, the international financial institutions, bilateral and multilateral donors and regional and subregional organizations. At the same time, it will provide a basis for further engagement with the country, a mechanism for effective coordination and a means of marshalling additional resources, which are so vitally needed.

As part of the process of developing the strategic framework, the Peacebuilding Commission intends to conduct a field mission to Guinea-Bissau, which will take place in early April 2008. Previous experiences in the Peacebuilding Commission have shown that field trips are invaluable to getting a better understanding of the country's challenges in the area of peacebuilding.

We trust that the Peacebuilding Commission will be in a position to provide further advice on peacebuilding priorities and challenges in Guinea-Bissau in the coming months. We hope that, as our work evolves, the Peacebuilding Commission will make a difference in ensuring a brighter future of political stability and economic prosperity for the people of Guinea-Bissau.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I thank Her Excellency Mrs. Viotti for her briefing.

I now give the floor to His Excellency Alfredo Lopes Cabral, Permanent Representative of Guinea-Bissau.

Mr. Cabral (Guinea-Bissau) (*spoke in French*): On behalf of my delegation, allow me to congratulate you, Sir, on your assumption of the presidency of the Security Council for the month of March. I am grateful to the members of the Council for having agreed to my request to participate in this meeting.

My purpose today is to thank the members of the Security Council on behalf of my Government for having responded favourably to the request of our Government to inscribe Guinea-Bissau on the agenda of the Peacebuilding Commission. The Council's response once again today should be interpreted as its agreement that our country deserves the attention of the international community and to have the Peacebuilding Commission focus on its case in particular in order to determine how we can work together to ensure that the situation changes for the better. I would therefore like to say how pleased I am with the choice of the Brazilian Ambassador as Chair of the Guinea-Bissau configuration of the Peacebuilding Commission. Members of the Council will have noted from the briefing she has just delivered the excellent quality of the work done to date and how closely the whole of the Commission, the Guinea-Bissau configuration, officials of Guinea-Bissau and international partners are working together to ensure that we can put in place a new process that can provide more sustained attention to Guinea-Bissau.

We have taken note of the latest report (S/2008/181) of the Secretary-General. We are very pleased that he has recognized the efforts that have been made in Guinea-Bissau, which have led to substantial progress. In that regard, I do not think it an exaggeration to say that we are moving in the right direction to strengthen democracy. We now have in place an inclusive Government comprised of numerous parties. We are on our way to establishing an inclusive democracy, for we want a participatory democracy in Guinea-Bissau. We therefore agree with the Secretary-General that further efforts must be made to ensure that we can strengthen democracy in our country. There are, however, some conditions to be met in order to do that.

We are a poor country with problems and are in need of international assistance. I shall not refer to the content of the report, as members are familiar with it. I would simply like to say that we need the international community to help us move ahead with reforms, including the reform of the security and public administration sectors, in order to give new impetus to democracy and good governance alike. We also need the international community's assistance for our approach to human rights, which should not simply be theoretical but should ensure respect for human rights, civic protection and the access of all to genuine justice.

I should therefore like to dwell for a few moments on the amnesty law that has been voted on in Guinea-Bissau's National Assembly. This law does not mean that we want to promote a policy of impunity — quite the contrary. The amnesty law should be seen as part of an effort at national reconciliation. Of course, we will spare no effort to ensure that the crucial issue of impunity is resolved and that those who have committed crimes are brought to justice and receive the punishment they deserve under the law.

I would also like to refer to the upcoming elections. As the Representative of the Secretary-General pointed out a few moments ago, the date for those elections has been set. The fact is that it is not up to the country's President to unilaterally set the date for elections. There is a democratic process in place, which the Council and the international community support and which we have followed. It is up to the National Electoral Commission to assess the situation and, after having consulted the political parties, to make a recommendation to the President. I am pleased that the President yesterday promulgated the law setting 16 November as the date for the elections.

In conclusion, I would like to say that we are pleased with the cooperation we have established with the Peacebuilding Commission, and especially with its Guinea-Bissau configuration. That configuration is being led with great skill and determination and with the sensitivity for which our Brazilian friends are known — sensitivity which comes from their awareness of the situation in Africa in general and in Guinea-Bissau in particular. I am therefore hopeful that, under the leadership of our colleague Ambassador Viotti of Brazil, we will be able to work with the members of the Council to ensure that good governance becomes a reality in Guinea-Bissau, that democracy is strengthened in our country and that the elections — which constitute a decisive step towards strengthening democracy — take place.

I also hope that our case can receive greater attention and interest and that the international community will assess the situation in Guinea-Bissau anew, so that concerted efforts can be made to improve the situation. The ultimate objective of the efforts of the international community and our own efforts at the national level is to improve the living conditions of our people and ensure that we can at last live in a truly democratic country at peace with itself.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I thank His Excellency Mr. Cabral for his statement.

There are no further speakers inscribed on my list. In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I now invite the members of the Council to informal consultations to continue our discussion of the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.40 a.m.

United Nations

S/PV.5861

Security Council

Sixty-third year

Provisional

5861st meeting

Monday, 31 March 2008, 10 a.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Churkin	(Russian Federation)
Members:	Belgium	Mr. Belle
	Burkina Faso	Mr. Tiendrébéogo
	China	Mr. Liu Zhenmin
	Costa Rica	Mr. Urbina
	Croatia	Mr. Jurica
	France	Mr. Ripert
	Indonesia	Mr. Kleib
	Italy	Mr. Spatafora
	Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	Mr. Ettalhi
	Panama	Mr. Suescum
	South Africa	Mr. Kumalo
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. McKenzie Smith
	United States of America	Mr. DeLaurentis
	Viet Nam	Mr. Hoang Chi Trung

Agenda

The situation concerning the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Letter dated 11 February 2008 from the Chairman of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1533 (2004) concerning the Democratic Republic of the Congo addressed to the President of the Security Council (S/2008/43)

This record contains the text of speeches delivered in English and of the interpretation of speeches delivered in the other languages. The final text will be printed in the *Official Records of the Security Council*. Corrections should be submitted to the original languages only. They should be incorporated in a copy of the record and sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned to the Chief of the Verbatim Reporting Service, room C-154A.

08-28841 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation concerning the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Letter dated 11 February 2008 from the Chairman of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1533 (2004) concerning the Democratic Republic of the Congo addressed to the President of the Security Council (S/2008/43)

The President (*spoke in Russian*): I should like to inform the Council that I have received a letter from the representative of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in which he requests to be invited to participate in the consideration of the item on the Council's agenda. In conformity with the usual practice, I propose, with the consent of the Council, to invite that representative to participate in the consideration of the item, without the right to vote, in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Charter and rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

At the invitation of the President, Mr. Ileka (Democratic Republic of the Congo) took a seat at the Council table.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): The Security Council will now begin its consideration on the item of the agenda. The Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

Members of the Council have before them document S/2008/213, which contains the text of a draft resolution submitted by Belgium, Italy, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, France, Croatia and Costa Rica.

I should also like to draw the attention of the members to document S/2008/43, which contains the text of a letter dated 11 February 2008 from the Chairman of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to resolution 1533 (2004) concerning the Democratic Republic of the Congo addressed to the President of the Security Council, transmitting the final report of its Group of Experts.

It is my understanding that the Council is ready to proceed to the vote on the draft resolution.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

A vote was taken by show of hands.

In favour:

Belgium, Burkina Faso, China, Costa Rica, Croatia, France, Indonesia, Italy, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Panama, Russian Federation, South Africa, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America, Viet Nam.

The President (*spoke in Russian*): There were 15 votes in favour. The draft resolution has been adopted unanimously as resolution 1807 (2008).

The Security Council has thus concluded the present stage of its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Council will remain seized of the matter.

The meeting rose at 10.15 a.m.

United Nations

S/PV.5862

Security Council

Sixty-third year

Provisional

5862nd meeting

Tuesday, 8 April 2008, 10 a.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Kumalo	(South Africa)
Members:	Belgium	Mr. Belle
	Burkina Faso	Mr. Kafando
	China	Mr. Liu Zhenmin
	Costa Rica	Mr. Urbina
	Croatia	Mr. Jurica
	France	Mr. Ripert
	Indonesia	Mr. Natalegawa
	Italy	Mr. Spatafora
	Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	Mr. Ettalhi
	Panama	Mr. Suescum
	Russian Federation	Mr. Dolgov
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Ms. Pierce
	United States of America	Mr. DeLaurentis
	Viet Nam	Mr. Le Luong Minh

Agenda

The question concerning Haiti

Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (S/2008/202)

This record contains the text of speeches delivered in English and of the interpretation of speeches delivered in the other languages. The final text will be printed in the *Official Records of the Security Council*. Corrections should be submitted to the original languages only. They should be incorporated in a copy of the record and sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned to the Chief of the Verbatim Reporting Service, room C-154A.

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Expression of thanks to the retiring President

The President: As this is the first meeting of the Security Council for the month of April 2008, I should like to take this opportunity to pay tribute, on behalf of the Council, to His Excellency Mr. Vitaly Churkin, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, for his service as President of the Security Council for the month of March 2008. I am sure I speak for all members of the Council in expressing deep appreciation to Ambassador Churkin for the great diplomatic skill with which he conducted the Council's business last month.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The question concerning Haiti

Report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (S/2008/202)

The President: I should like to inform the Council that I have received a letter from the representative of Haiti in which he requests to be invited to participate in the consideration of the item on the Council's agenda. In conformity with the usual practice, I propose, with the consent of the Council, to invite that representative to participate in the consideration of the item, without the right to vote, in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Charter and rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

At the invitation of the President, Mr. Cazeau (Haiti), took a seat at the Council table.

The President: In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Hédi Annabi, Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti.

It is so decided.

I invite Mr. Annabi to take a seat at the Council table.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

Members of the Council have before them document S/2008/202, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Hédi Annabi, Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti. I now give the floor to Mr. Annabi.

Mr. Annabi: I am very pleased to be back in the Security Council today and to have the opportunity to update members of the Council on the work of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) in accordance with the mandate entrusted to it under resolution 1780 (2007), which was adopted last October.

In Haiti today we face a time of opportunity, which is also a time of risk. As reflected in the report (S/2008/202) before the Council, we are encouraged by the political, security and institution-building progress to date and by initial signs of improvement in the socio-economic situation. Those gains are real and significant, but we must also recognize that they are only a first step, that that progress remains extraordinarily fragile and subject to swift reversal and that we have far to go before it can be considered to be durable and sustainable. As an introduction to this morning's discussion, it may be useful to share with the Council our thinking on the way forward.

The foundation of any durable progress in Haiti will remain the existence of a minimal level of political consensus in the country. To date, the current Government, which came to office in June 2006 through an electoral process that was strongly supported by MINUSTAH, has sought to promote such a consensus, and it generally continues to enjoy legitimacy in the eyes of the public. It has relied on that legitimacy to begin to address a number of key issues, including the strengthening of State institutions and the fight against corruption and impunity. President René Préval and Prime Minister Jacques Edouard Alexis have taken a very clear stand in that regard.

While this political consensus remains vital, it is also extremely fragile. There are clear and continuing threats that democratic debate could relapse into political infighting and instability and that that could in turn generate violence. Over the past six months, tensions between individual political actors and among the various branches of the Government have at times threatened to escalate and to undermine public confidence. The potential for a deterioration in relations was made clear by the *interpellation* — the summoning — of the Prime Minister before the Chamber of Deputies in late February. While the majority of deputies voted in support of the Prime Minister, that process was a clear reminder of the degree to which collaboration remains fragile.

Still more recently, we saw a dramatic indication of the potential for problems, when a shooting took place in parliament during a debate related to investigations into alleged spending irregularities by legislators. Further problems may lie ahead, related, inter alia, to continuing inquiries over the possession of double nationality by legislators and Government officials, over the question of constitutional reform and over the preparation of elections for one third of the Senate. Furthermore, the current unrest that we are seeing in various parts of the country, which is frequently presented as demonstrations against *la vie chère* — the high cost of living — also appear to have a political dimension, in addition to expressing mounting frustrations about the rising cost of basic food commodities.

MINUSTAH will continue to do what it can to promote constructive dialogue, but it is also incumbent upon the wider international community to actively encourage a responsible approach by all political actors. Ultimately, political progress will depend upon the Haitians themselves. While moments of tension will be inevitable, it is crucial that political leaders and opinion makers rise to the occasion and show restraint and a genuine desire for collaboration and dialogue.

Overall, the country's democratic structures must be strengthened and nurtured, in order to favour a greater institutionalization of dialogue and to help break a tradition of politically motivated violence. It is also essential that the country's basic administrative capacities be enhanced, so that essential services can be provided to the population. MINUSTAH can provide a small portion of the assistance that is required, and it will continue to support the local authorities. It will also continue to work towards the strengthening of national capabilities in such key areas as border management. But coordinated bilateral aid will remain vital to enable real and durable progress.

In the area of security there have also been important gains over the reporting period, alongside warning signs that the situation remains fragile and that further efforts are required. The sustained security operations conducted by MINUSTAH in the first part of last year against gangs in Port-au-Prince and Gonaïves in support of the Haitian authorities continue to bear fruit today. The overall security situation in the country remains far better than it was, but we have also seen a resurgence of kidnapping in the past few months. An average of about 30 kidnappings has been registered per month during the period from December 2007 to the end of March 2008.

Those numbers are becoming a political liability for both the Government and MINUSTAH. There are also recurrent indications that gangs may be trying to reorganize themselves. Those kinds of threats, which appear essentially criminal in nature, may be — and often are — manipulated for political purposes.

At the same time, we have seen a rise in anti-Government demonstrations, with a particular focus on the recent dramatic increase in the cost of living, as I mentioned earlier. The potential security implications of such unrest were made clear last week, when such demonstrations required the evacuation of our offices in Les Cayes, in the south of the country. Similar demonstrations, albeit less violent, also took place last week in Gonaives, Port-au-Prince and a few other locations.

Because of the violence that has occurred in the past, the Haitian public is particularly sensitive to threats of instability. A firm and visible response is essential and can only be achieved through collaboration between the Haitian authorities and MINUSTAH, whose military and police are playing a critical role.

In order to combat the threat of criminality and violence, we have reinforced our collaboration with the Haitian authorities and enhanced sharing of information. We have stepped up the presence of checkpoints throughout Port-au-Prince, where most of the kidnappings have taken place, and we are working to enhance the investigative and response capabilities of our police, an area where we will need the continued help of police-contributing countries to obtain the necessary skills that MINUSTAH currently lacks. At the same time, our formed police units are working closely with their Haitian counterparts to respond to incidents of civil unrest.

The Mission is also reinforcing its presence along the land and maritime borders of Haiti, as mandated under resolution 1780 (2007). Our objective is to support the extension of State authority in the area and to help the Government to deter smuggling or illicit trafficking in drugs and arms that could have implications for the security of the country. As reflected in the report, we are now deployed at the four main crossing points along the land border and are undertaking regular land patrols on the coastline and joint maritime patrols aboard Haitian coast guard vessels, pending deployment of our own maritime capabilities. However, real effectiveness in this area will necessarily depend on complementary bilateral assistance to the Haitian authorities from Member States in the region and beyond.

Alongside their role in responding to threats, our military and police have also provided assistance in times of urgent humanitarian crises. Their resourcefulness and dedication have made a crucial difference in that regard.

We have also launched a series of innovative community violence reduction projects that we believe can make a genuine difference on the ground. By providing immediate employment through small-scale projects, those efforts can breathe some desperately needed hope into troubled areas and help diminish the economic pressures that fuel constant cycles of violence. They support the reintegration of some of those who have been involved in lesser criminal activities by including them in the workforce. They also help generate some tangible improvements in the daily lives of communities at risk. I personally visited six of those projects last month in Cité Soleil and Martissant and was encouraged to see that, after some delays, that community violence reduction programme is now on track.

The consolidation of security will require, of course, the creation of viable Haitian rule-of-law structures that can progressively assume more responsibilities as their capacity increases. Over the past six months, some progress has taken place, but much more remains to be done to reach the benchmarks noted in the report.

MINUSTAH has been working closely with the Haitian authorities to implement the Haitian National Police reform plan. Some 8,450 officers are now in service, approximately 1,000 of whom are undertaking functions other than policing, such as those of corrections personnel, the coast guard and the fire brigade. While that represents a substantial step forward, it is far short of the minimum of 14,000 officers who are required to ensure basic policing functions, according to the Haitian National Police reform plan. MINUSTAH will continue its efforts to assist in the professionalization of the police and its institutional development, but complementary bilateral support will obviously remain indispensable to meeting the outstanding needs of the police, including in key areas such as infrastructure, transport, telecommunications and other equipment.

Similarly, the adoption last December of three critical laws on the independence of the judiciary and of national reform plans for the justice and penal systems, drawing on strong support from MINUSTAH, can pave the way for progress. But continued, coordinated efforts will be essential to turning those blueprints into reality. Sustained engagement by the Haitian political leadership will be necessary to put in place the Superior Council of the Judiciary and the School for Magistrates, which are of key importance. Priority must also be given to short- and medium-term steps to address the situation in the prison system, which is unacceptable from both a security and human rights perspective. Here again, bilateral assistance is indispensable to providing the additional resources, skills and equipment that are required for even basic effectiveness.

Finally, the socio-economic situation also presents a mixed picture. While such problems do not fall directly within the mandated responsibilities of MINUSTAH, it is clear that stability and development are inextricably linked.

Haiti has made significant progress in stabilizing the economy, and real gross domestic product (GDP) growth is estimated to have risen to 3.2 per cent in 2007, which brings Haiti, in terms of overall level of the GDP, back to the level of 1991. The annual inflation rate declined to about 8 per cent last year, down from 30 to 40 per cent a few years earlier, and the currency has remained stable. The Government has prepared a national growth and poverty reduction strategy paper which embodies Haiti's development priorities and should form the basis for future assistance strategies, starting with the discussions that are expected to take place on 24 and 25 April 2008 in Port-au-Prince.

All of that is encouraging, but it has not yet brought about any immediate improvement in the difficult living conditions of the vast majority of the population, who have in fact experienced additional hardship as a result of the significant increases in prices of a number of staple commodities over recent months. That has generated growing public discontent over what is called in Haiti "la vie chère", which has a clear potential to undermine all of our stabilization efforts.

In that context, it is urgent that donor countries, the international financial institutions and the private sector, including Haitians living abroad, work with the Haitian authorities to find creative ways to generate what I call a stability dividend — in other words, an immediate and tangible improvement in socio-economic conditions that can allow the stabilization process to advance.

I would like to conclude by reiterating that we still have far to go in Haiti. As noted in the report, the Haitian authorities have primary responsibility for the stabilization process. However, it is equally obvious — and the Haitian authorities themselves are very clear on this point — that they cannot do it alone. They will continue to need substantial external assistance. Similarly, the continued presence of a peacekeeping operation is indispensable, and it must be supplemented by the sustained and coordinated efforts of bilateral donors and the wider international community.

Our common objective must be one of crossing a definitive threshold of stability that would obviate the need for a future peacekeeping operation in Haiti. In line with the Security Council request made in paragraph 22 of resolution 1780 (2007), the present report provides some initial proposals on benchmarks by which consolidation of the stabilization process might be measured in each of the key areas of our mandate. We have identified five such benchmarks.

First, the area of political progress could include the completion of the new electoral cycle, which begins this year with the senatorial elections and should culminate in a peaceful transition to a democratically elected president and parliament in 2011.

Secondly, a sustainable security structure should be created, one capable of responding to threats while respecting professional standards.

Thirdly, key elements of an independent and credible judicial and penal system that upholds human rights standards should be established.

Fourthly and more generally, the establishment throughout the country of a functioning administration that can deliver basic services, including an effective border management strategy, is essential.

Finally, palpable improvements in the living conditions of the general population and positive growth in gross domestic product for a number of years, as well as a significant rise in employment and in the level of investments, are key indicators that, we believe, the Security Council should keep in mind as it takes decisions regarding the future of its involvement in Haiti.

In a rapidly changing and often difficult environment, it is important to avoid the trap of premature optimism or, alternatively, disproportionate discouragement in the face of inevitable setbacks. I believe that we must stay the course and stay focused on the reality that this is probably an exceptional moment of opportunity for Haiti to escape the destructive cycles of the past. We need to work together to ensure that this opportunity is seized, that the country's emerging stability is consolidated and that firm foundations are laid for a better future.

Let me thank you, Mr. President, and the other members of the Council for your strong support for Haiti. Your support will remain key to MINUSTAH's success as we continue our work on the challenging road ahead of us.

The President: I thank Mr. Annabi for his briefing.

In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion of the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.35 a.m.

United Nations S/PV.5863

Provisional

Security Council

Sixty-third year

5863rd meeting

Tuesday, 8 April 2008, 3 p.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Kumalo	(South Africa)
Members:	Belgium	Mr. Verbeke
	Burkina Faso	Mr. Kafando
	China	Mr. Liu Zhenmin
	Costa Rica	Ms. Villalobos
	Croatia	Mr. Skračić
	France	Mr. Ripert
	Indonesia	Mr. Natalegawa
	Italy	Mr. Mantovani
	Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	Mr. Mubarak
	Panama	Mr. Suescum
	Russian Federation	Mr. Rogachev
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. McKenzie Smith
	United States of America	Mr. Khalilzad
	Viet Nam	Mr. Bui The Giang

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

Letter dated 28 March 2008 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council (S/2008/210)

This record contains the text of speeches delivered in English and of the interpretation of speeches delivered in the other languages. The final text will be printed in the *Official Records of the Security Council*. Corrections should be submitted to the original languages only. They should be incorporated in a copy of the record and sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned to the Chief of the Verbatim Reporing Service, room C-154A.

The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

Letter dated 28 March 2008 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council (S/2008/210)

The President: I should like to inform the Council that I have received a letter from the representative of Lebanon in which he requests to be invited to participate in the consideration of the item on the Council's agenda. In accordance with the usual practice, I propose, with the consent of the Council, to invite that representative to participate in the consideration without the right to vote, in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Charter and rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

At the invitation of the President, Mr. Salam (Lebanon) took a seat at the Council table.

The President: In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Daniel Bellemare, Commissioner of the United Nations International Independent Investigation Commission.

It is so decided.

I invite Mr. Bellemare to take a seat at the Council table.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

Members of the Council have before them document S/2008/210, which contains a letter dated 28 March 2008 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council, transmitting the tenth report of the International Independent Investigation Commission.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Daniel Bellemare, Commissioner of the United Nations International Independent Investigation Commission. I now give the floor to Mr. Bellemare.

Mr. Bellemare: "Terrorism is never justifiable on any ground.... It hurts all nations — large and small, rich and poor. It takes a toll on human beings of every age and income, culture and religion." Those are the words of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. Those words act as a constant reminder for the members of the Commission over which I have the honour and the privilege to preside.

This is my first appearance before the Security Council since I took office last January. I would like to thank members for the opportunity to brief the Council on the progress made by the International Independent Investigation Commission.

It is my honour to present today the tenth report of the Commission. As requested, it outlines progress made since 28 November 2007 in the investigation of the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and the 22 others who were killed during the attack, and of other attacks that fall within the mandate of the Commission. Since this is the first time I am addressing the Council both as Commissioner and as Prosecutor Designate, I would like to take this opportunity to share a few thoughts on how I approach my role.

The mandate that the Council gave the Commission in 2005 is particularly challenging. Not only is the investigation objectively very complex, it is also being conducted in a politically charged climate and in an extremely volatile environment. Unfortunately, the establishment of the Commission has not had an immediate deterrent effect on terrorists. Bombings have continued, with two more deadly attacks that have been added to the Commission's mandate since the last report.

Our investigation involves a series of terrorist attacks which have killed 55 people and injured over 420. The magnitude of the attacks, their continuing nature and the fact that investigations are conducted in an environment dominated by ongoing security concerns add to the challenges facing the Commission.

Members may rest assured, however, that the Commission will not be deterred by the prevailing violence. On the contrary, each attack increases the resolve of the men and women of the more than 60 countries that have answered the call for help and are fully committed to bringing an end to impunity in Lebanon.

My mission's overarching principle is to ensure that justice is done. With that in mind, the Commission will yield to no pressure, political or otherwise, and the identification of suspects will be based on sound legal standards supported by concrete evidence.

Acting under the flag of the United Nations, it is against that uniquely challenging backdrop that the Commission advances its mandate in a neutral and objective manner. In doing so, the Commission must continue to keep an open mind and not presuppose the outcome. As Carla del Ponte once said, "facts are pieces of truth on the way to justice". In its search for truth and justice, applying basic principles of fairness, neutrality and impartiality, the Commission must be guided by facts and evidence. Everything else is irrelevant. To act otherwise would be to fail the international community and, in particular, the people of Lebanon.

The Commission is an independent body. It was created to help put an end to impunity in Lebanon by making sure that the perpetrators of the attacks falling within the mandate of the Commission have no safe haven and that they are eventually brought to justice.

Independence, however, does not mean isolation; nor does it mean that the Commission operates in a vacuum. Quite the contrary, because the Commission is acting under the flag of the United Nations, it is also acting on behalf of Member States. Member States have provided assistance to the Commission when their assistance was sought. I thank them for their support. Indeed, Member States should continue to ask themselves whether and how they can assist the Commission. In doing so, they can be forthcoming and proactive; their assistance does not have to be predicated on the existence of specific requests made by the Commission.

Members of the Security Council are familiar with the constraints faced by the Commission regarding the disclosure of its findings. The Commission has to constantly find a delicate balance between its reporting obligations and the need to preserve the confidentiality of the investigation. The need for confidentiality is obvious; it is necessary to maintain the integrity of the process. Indeed, the Commission cannot ignore the fact that the perpetrators are watching every move it makes.

However, we have every intention of being transparent, to the extent possible, without jeopardizing the security or the safety of those who want to cooperate with us — and who may eventually be called upon to appear before the Tribunal — and the security and safety of our staff. Transparency is essential to maintain the confidence of the public in the Commission as an institution and the trust in its operations.

Public expectations are high. That is understandable. The many steps taken towards the creation of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon may have created an impression that the conclusion of the investigation was imminent. In addition, public speculation on the timing of possible indictments may also have fuelled the rising expectations.

Regrettably, we cannot prevent speculation, but public expectations must be addressed. That is why it is both useful and important to send the clear message that the search for justice cannot be rushed — it must follow its course. Any illusion of immediacy must be dispelled. Our progress is neither slow nor immediate — it is deliberate. With that in mind, let me now update the Council on the progress made in the past four months, including new developments in the Commission's work and challenges ahead.

First, in relation to the investigation of the Hariri case and the 22 others who were killed during the attack, the Commission can now confirm, on the basis of evidence, that a network of individuals acted in concert to carry out the assassination of Rafiq Hariri and that this network — which has been referred to as the "Hariri network" — or parts of the network are linked to some of the other cases within the Commission's mandate.

It is probably useful for me to pause at this time and to clarify two points. First, let me say a few words about the use in the report of the words "criminal network". Those words should be read in the context of the whole report, which clearly refers to a terrorist investigation. The direction of the investigation has not changed, and the Commission is still investigating crimes that are politically motivated. Secondly, while previous reports have referred to the hypothesis of a network, what is new this time is that we now have the evidence of the existence of such a network and of its links.

The Commission has also gathered evidence that the Hariri network existed before the Hariri assassination; that it conducted surveillance of Mr. Hariri before his assassination; that it operated on the day of Mr. Hariri's assassination; and that at least part of the network continued to exist and operate after Mr. Hariri's assassination.

Our priority is now to gather more evidence about the Hariri network, its scope, the identity of all of its participants, their links with others outside the network and their role in the attacks. In relation to the other attacks that fall within its mandate, the Commission has continued to assist the Lebanese authorities in providing a number of measures of technical assistance, ranging from forensic analysis to reviewing imagery materials. The Commission has continued to investigate possible links between those cases and the Hariri case.

The technical assistance provided to our Lebanese hosts is not only meant to support the cases at hand; it is also designed to allow the Lebanese authorities to build capacity for the future. In that regard, the Commission would like to note, however, that the sooner its assistance is requested, the more likely that technical assistance can be meaningful.

The mandate and the work of the Commission are ground-breaking. Methods of investigations used in a traditional domestic setting have to be adapted to the existing environment. Operational imperatives or administrative challenges like staff recruitment and retention must be addressed with creativity. The Commission's needs and requirements may often stretch the limits of existing United Nations policies. Off-the-shelf solutions are not necessarily suited to the pursuit of a precedent-setting mission like ours. Every day we must adjust, invent and create new ways to advance our operations.

Much is said and written about the Tribunal. As Prosecutor Designate of the Tribunal, I will only state that the filing of eventual indictments will not be immediate after the establishment of the Tribunal. The admissible evidence will have to be carefully and objectively considered in light of the applicable prosecution threshold. No one can predict or dictate how long this process will take.

As Louise Arbour said when she was Prosecutor at the ICTY:

> "An independent Prosecutor must be able to stand apart from national politics, the interests of individual States and the goals of any particular foreign policy. Indeed, not only must the Prosecutor stand apart from such considerations, he or she must stand above them, and be fully prepared without fear or favour to contradict them or to challenge political pressures which may seek to influence the course of justice."

That being said, however, ideally the time between the establishment of the operations of the Tribunal and the eventual filing of indictments should be as short as possible. That is the reason why the progress of the investigation becomes such a crucial element in determining when the Tribunal will commence its operation.

As a result, while the preparatory steps for the establishment of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon are continuing, I would request this Council to consider extending the Commission's mandate beyond the date of 15 June 2008. That would give the Commission the needed time to continue its investigation. It would also provide a desirable measure of stability and predictability for our staff.

In conclusion, let me say that any unnecessary delay in finding the truth and bringing the perpetrators to justice must be avoided. But, as I have mentioned before, the search for justice must be allowed to follow its course. In saying so, I understand and share the frustration of the surviving victims, the families of the deceased and the people of Lebanon who expect quick results. Though legitimate and understandable, that frustration must not be allowed to undermine the trust and the confidence that members of the international community and the people of Lebanon have placed in the Commission and in its process.

With the continued assistance of Member States and the ongoing support of the Lebanese authorities, I can assure the Council that no effort will be spared to expedite the process as much as humanly possible.

Mr. Rogachev (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): I would like to thank Mr. Bellemare for his briefing.

I would like to receive, for the first time, information on a number of elements of the big picture of the investigation of the killing of the former Prime Minister of Lebanon, Rafiq Hariri, and the fate of the former Director General of General Security in Lebanon, General Jamil Al Sayed, and the three other former heads of the Lebanese Special Services suspected of being part of the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri.

Do we correctly understand that these four people have been in prison for almost three years now, with no indictment and that they have been detained on the recommendation of the first head of the Commission? And that this recommendation in considered to still be in force?

The President: I now give the floor to the representative of Lebanon.

Mr. Salam (Lebanon) (*spoke in Arabic*): Allow me at the outset, on behalf of Lebanon, to congratulate you, Mr. President, and your friendly country on assuming the presidency of the Security Council this month. Let me also express our sincerest appreciation to the delegation of the Russian Federation for its presidency of the Council last month.

We meet today to discuss the tenth report of the International Independent Investigation Commission on the crime of the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and his companions. Since the last report of the Commission, two new crimes have been perpetrated, the first targeting General François al-Hajj and the second, Major Wissam Eid. They were both martyred, along with a new number of civilian victims.

Thus the number of crimes for which the International Commission is providing technical assistance to the Lebanese authorities in their investigation has reached 20. They are all acts of terrorism aimed at destabilizing Lebanon through the targeting of free thinkers and politicians, as well as leaders of both the military and security establishments. On top of this, many innocent people in the safe havens of their homes and places of work have been targeted.

That series of cowardly, terrorist attacks has resulted in the deaths of 61 people and the wounding of no less than 494 others. We must also recall here that the cowardly hand of terrorism has also reached out targeted elements of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon in southern Lebanon, as well as members of the diplomatic corps accredited to Lebanon.

Lebanon is making many sacrifices for its freedom. They are only matched by our determination and by the Council's determination, through the International Commission, to find out the truth, to find out who plotted, participated in and perpetrated such crimes. There are many sacrifices that Lebanon is making for its freedom. They are only matched by our insistence, and the Council's, on setting up the Special Tribunal for Lebanon with an international character to ensure that there will be no impunity for the perpetrators.

Our search for truth has never been for the sake of revenge. We have sought the truth in order to help our people heal the wounds caused by this series of terrorist attacks. We are on a path that you, Mr. President, know more than any other, as your great country, South Africa, has had a leading experience, together with Bishop Desmond Tutu, in stressing the importance of truth in overcoming the pains that your people have suffered. As truth, as former President Nelson Mandela said, helped your country to find common understanding of its path, we also hope that truth will help us reach a common understanding of this chapter in the history of our country.

Our seeking to set up the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, a tribunal with an international character, has always sought justice in order to deter terrorists from perpetrating their crimes in order to restore stability and security to our country and to restore a sense of civility and safety to our people.

I have listened very carefully to the statement made by Commissioner Daniel Bellemare. On behalf of the Government of Lebanon, I should like to reiterate our congratulations to him on his assumption of office. Allow me also to express our sincere appreciation of his sense of leadership and the great professionalism he has demonstrated since taking over the Commission at the beginning of this year. I should also like to convey our most heartfelt thanks to all of those working in the Commission for their excellent work. With regard to the substance of Mr. Bellemare's statement and the Commission's tenth report, which has now been transmitted to the Council, I should like to make the following observations on behalf of my delegation.

First, we pay tribute to the Commission, in the person of its Commissioner and members, for carrying out their work in difficult security conditions and for the success they have achieved in more than doubling — from 123 to 256 — the number of the Commission's requests for assistance to Lebanon and other States. We also welcome the Commission's flexibility with regard to those requests for assistance, as well as for seeking assistance from the largest number of international forensic laboratories in order to achieve results as soon as possible.

Secondly, we welcome the concrete results achieved by the Commission on the basis of the evidence it continues to collect, in particular as that has enabled the Commission to ascertain that the assassination of former Prime Minister Hariri was carried out by a criminal network, that some parts of that network are linked to a number of other crimes covered by the Commission's mandate, that that network was in place prior to Prime Minister Hariri's assassination and that elements of the network are still in place and continue to operate.

Thirdly, we would like to draw the Council's attention to the fact that the Commission is continuing to cooperate with Lebanese judicial authorities — whether with regard to exchanges of information, the holding of meetings, evaluating evidence or preparing for future stages of the current investigation. We would also like to reiterate the commitment of the Government of Lebanon to ensuring full protection for the headquarters and members of the Commission.

Fourthly, having read last year's report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council (S/2007/525) on the important progress made in the steps to establish the Special Tribunal for Lebanon — including the signing of the headquarters agreement, the selection of judges, the appointment of the Registrar, the establishment of the administration and the collection of a large number of necessary financial contributions — we would like to welcome the reference in Mr. Bellemare's report regarding the completion of the necessary steps for the transitional period prior to the establishment of the Tribunal and for the transfer of evidence and other judicial matters.

The delegation of Lebanon takes note of Mr. Bellemare's request that the Commission's mandate be renewed. Let me assure the Council that my Government will look most favourably on the matter.

The President: I now give the floor to Mr. Bellemare to respond to the comments and questions raised.

Mr. Bellemare: I thank the representative of the Russian Federation for his question. The first thing that I would like to say is that the situation of the individuals he referred to results from a decision that was made by the Lebanese judicial authorities according to Lebanese criminal law. It is not for me to second-guess their decision. I have continued to provide the Lebanese judicial authorities with all the information we have, so that they can make their own assessment on the continued detention.

I have discussed the matter with the Prosecutor General of Lebanon; but the Council will understand that I will not comment publicly on my discussion with him. The Prosecutor General is the highest judicial investigative authority in Lebanon, and he is my main interlocutor. My relationship with him is based on trust, and that trust is based on the confidentiality of our discussions. I also understand, from recent media reports, that the matter may soon be litigated before an international tribunal, which is yet another reason for me not to comment further.

The President: I thank Mr. Bellemare for his further comments.

There are no further speakers inscribed on my list. In accordance with understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 3.35 p.m.

United Nations

S/PV.5864

Provisional

Security Council

Sixty-third year

5864th meeting

Monday, 14 April 2008, 10 a.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Kumalo	(South Africa)
Members:	Belgium	Mr. Belle
	Burkina Faso	Mr. Kafando
	China	Mr. Liu Zhenmin
	Costa Rica	Mr. Weisleder
	Croatia	Mr. Vilović
	France	Mr. Ripert
	Indonesia	Mr. Kleib
	Italy	Mr. Mantovani
	Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	Mr. Ettalhi
	Panama	Mr. Suescum
	Russian Federation	Mr. Kravchenko
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Sir John Sawers
	United States of America	Mr. DeLaurentis
	Viet Nam	Mr. Le Luong Minh

Agenda

The situation in Liberia

Sixteenth progress report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia (S/2008/183)

This record contains the text of speeches delivered in English and of the interpretation of speeches delivered in the other languages. The final text will be printed in the *Official Records of the Security Council*. Corrections should be submitted to the original languages only. They should be incorporated in a copy of the record and sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned to the Chief of the Verbatim Reporting Service, room C-154A.

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in Liberia

Sixteenth progress report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia (S/2008/183)

The President: I should like to inform the Council that I have received a letter from the representative of Liberia, in which she requests to be invited to participate in the consideration of the item on the Council's agenda. In conformity with the usual practice, I propose, with the consent of the Council, to invite that representative to participate in the consideration of the item, without the right to vote, in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Charter and rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure.

There being no objection, it is so decided.

At the invitation of the President, Mrs. Osode (Liberia) took a seat at the Council table.

The President: In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Ms. Ellen Margrethe Løj, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Liberia.

It is so decided.

I invite Ms. Løj to take a seat at the Council table.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

Members of the Council have before them document S/2008/183, which contains the sixteenth progress report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Ms. Ellen Margrethe Løj, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Liberia. I now give her the floor.

Ms. Løj: Let me begin by thanking you, Mr. President, for this opportunity to present the sixteenth progress report (S/2008/183) of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL). In doing so, I extend my appreciation to the members of the Security Council for their strong support for the work of the Mission.

Significant progress has been made since the Council was briefed in September 2007 by my predecessor, Mr. Alan Doss. The Secretary-General's report that is before the Council provides an update on major developments in Liberia and the progress made in meeting the core benchmarks for the consolidation phase of UNMIL's consolidation, drawdown and withdrawal plan. On the basis of those and the progress achieved, benchmarks for the drawdown phase have been developed in close consultation with the Government of Liberia and international partners.

Since the report has recently been released, I need not go through it in detail. I will instead focus on a number of critical areas that need to be addressed for further progress in Liberia and to enable the United Nations Mission in Liberia to successfully draw down.

Members of the Council know that I took up my duties as the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Liberia just three months ago. But most members will also know that, in my previous capacity, I followed developments in Liberia closely during 2005 and 2006 as Chairman of the Security Council's Sanctions Committee on Liberia and, in that capacity, first visited the country in April 2006.

Let me assure the Council that what has been accomplished in the two years since then under the dedicated and hardworking leadership of Her Excellency President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and her Government is truly amazing and highly commendable. But nowhere is it illustrated more clearly than in Liberia how closely peacebuilding and peacekeeping are linked. Nowhere is it illustrated more clearly than in Liberia that there will be no sustainable security without development and that there will be no development without sustainable security.

Steady progress has been achieved during the past two years in Liberia, including in the most recent reporting period, and the overall situation remains stable. But the security situation is fragile, and further progress is needed in a number of areas to truly solidify progress. The challenges relate to security, the rule of law, governance and economic development — all of which are closely interlinked. Those challenges have guided the formulation of the drawdown benchmarks that have been presented in the Secretary-General's report. At this critical juncture of Liberia's recovery, I would like in particular to highlight three critical areas that will need special attention: the reform of the security sector, not least the reform of the Liberian National Police; the reform of rule of law institutions; and the effective implementation of the new poverty reduction strategy and the priority task of addressing the high unemployment rate.

The security situation along Liberia's borders with three neighbouring countries was calm during the reporting period, but the situation on all three borders is closely monitored by UNMIL. Unrest in any of Liberia's neighbouring countries will have immediate negative consequences for the security situation in Liberia, and vice versa. In that respect, it is not only the political developments that should be closely monitored; we also need to constantly assess the potential negative consequences of the increasing use of some countries in the subregion as transit points for international drug trafficking. That is in addition to the occasional civil unrest due to sharp increases in the price of rice and gasoline.

Internally, the security situation in Liberia remains fragile. There continue to be occasional violent incidents on rubber plantations and in diamond-mining areas. The crime rate, in relation to both armed robberies and rape, remains high, and, in many of the reported rape cases, the victims are young girls — or rather children. In addition, there have been an increasing number of incidents of mob violence and attempts to administer mob justice, including attacks on police personnel and police stations by angry crowds who want to assault and even kill crime suspects being detained by the police. That is a clear sign of lack of trust in the security and justice system and of a readiness — as during the years of conflict — on the part of citizens to continue to fend for themselves. UNMIL itself has recently been a target of such action, when former UNMIL individual contractors carried out a violent protest during which three staff members were injured and two UNMIL vehicles were set ablaze.

These security incidents highlight the need for the Government to finalize the national security strategy and the reforms of the security institutions. These efforts are ongoing, but at a slower pace than originally planned. Progress is being made in the training and restructuring of the new Armed Forces of Liberia, and it is my hope that this tempo will be sustained. Any further delays will make it impossible for the new army to be fully operational before late 2009 and would impact directly on the timeline for the UNMIL drawdown plan.

The reform of the Liberian National Police (LNP) constitutes a bigger challenge at this point. The LNP still needs to gain the trust of the Liberian population. As of 30 June 2007, we had achieved the quantitative benchmark of providing basic training for 3,500 police officers. However, we now need to focus on improving the quality and professionalism of the individual police officers, enhancing the management structure and providing the LNP with the equipment and resources necessary to perform effectively. Recent disciplinary problems within the LNP have also raised the issue of the effectiveness of the vetting procedures for the new LNP. The Government of Liberia and UNMIL are now looking at ways to review the process, including through a verification exercise.

In the meantime, the development of the Emergency Response Unit within the police force is making progress. The training of the first batch of 90 officers has commenced. This process is, however, encountering some delays and funding gaps, which need to be addressed soon. In that regard, I wish to thank the Governments of the United States and Ireland, which have so far provided funding for the programme. But additional funds are needed from international partners, both to ensure a more effective functioning of the LNP and for the Unit to be operational by July 2009.

Despite efforts by the Government of Liberia to enhance the rule of law, deficiencies in the justice system continue to pose serious challenges to the administration of justice countrywide. These include the lack of adequate funding; a shortage of qualified judicial officials; the lack of infrastructure, including courts and prisons; inadequate numbers of qualified judicial and legal officers; poor case management; low salaries; and corruption. As a result of those deficiencies, many Liberians have little confidence in the justice system.

The lack of confidence in the rule of law institutions of Liberia, and especially in the LNP and the judicial system, deserves urgent attention. That will require not only improvements in the performance of law enforcement and judicial institutions, but equally important, a reorientation in the mindset of the population, which is too quick to resort to extrajudicial measures. In that regard, I am pleased to report that the Government held a Cabinet retreat in March, during which the problems in the rule of law sector, in particular the police and judicial institutions, were discussed and it was agreed to address them as a matter of priority.

UNMIL is collaborating with the Government to examine these problems and come up with solutions. A rule of law retreat is being planned to bring the executive and judiciary together at the national level to address those problems. UNMIL and the Government also recently held a joint forum to discuss the disturbing phenomenon of attacks on police and police stations. UNMIL is encouraged by the Government's plan to address those problems in a holistic manner. We have also undertaken a funding gap analysis to identify the resources — both recurrent and capital — that will be required over the next years for the full development of the LNP.

The incidence of gender-based violence in Liberia, in particular rape, is simply unacceptable. I am, however, pleased to report that with the support of UNMIL and the United Nations country team, the Government is in the process of finalizing the national gender policy. It has also developed a national action plan against gender-based violence to deter and prosecute rape cases. A special court created to prosecute rape cases will hopefully give teeth to the new rape law. But again, plans alone cannot do the trick. The mindset of Liberians committing these crimes — often against young children — simply must change. The Government of Liberia and all other relevant groups working to bring about positive change in this matter deserve the support of the international community.

I am also glad to report that the public hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission are going along well. A number of witnesses, including perpetrators and victims, have come before the Commission, both in Monrovia and in the counties, to give accounts of their experiences during the war. It is, however, disappointing that none of the major actors have so far testified. That does not augur well for the reconciliation process. I therefore wish to repeat the call of the Secretary-General to all Liberians to cooperate with the Commission in order to move the process forward. I also urge the international community to provide the Commission with the funding support it urgently needs to fulfil its mandate.

Liberia's new national poverty reduction strategy has been finalized. It has been based on a grass-roots participatory process, with ordinary citizens making inputs into the development agenda. That is very positive, but, of course, it has also raised expectations among Liberians, who want to see tangible results. The implementation of the strategy will not be easy, especially given the limited national implementation capacity available. And economic growth is urgently needed, especially in order to reduce the high unemployment rate, which also constitutes a serious security concern.

However, even if revenue collection can be enhanced and if the ambitious economic growth projections can be achieved, a significant funding gap will still need to be covered by external contributions. The Government will therefore need all the support it can get from international partners. In that regard, the upcoming Partners Forum, expected to be held during the last week of June in Berlin, will be a critical milestone. It is important that all development partners use the poverty reduction strategy as the framework for their activities.

March was a historic month for Liberia, not just because of the completion of the poverty reduction strategy, but also because the country reached the decision point under the enhanced Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Debt Initiative, as announced by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The next step will be for Liberia to reach the HIPC completion point. If that is to happen, successful implementation of the poverty reduction strategy and of the Governance and Economic Management Assistance Programme will be critical. In that respect, the progress made within the framework of the Programme is encouraging.

The Mission and the United Nations country team have continued to strengthen efforts to prevent or penalize sexual abuse and exploitation. That is being done through preventive measures, including extensive training, as well as through the prompt investigation of cases and the implementation of disciplinary measures when allegations have been substantiated. I am proud to say that our efforts have been yielding good results, as reflected in the significant reduction in the number of cases of sexual exploitation and abuse that were reported during the most recent reporting period. We will, however, not rest on our laurels.

In compliance with Security Council resolution 1777 (2007), the drawdown process of UNMIL has commenced. A battalion each from Namibia and Bangladesh has been withdrawn, while the Ghanaian and Nigerian battalions have been reduced by one company each. Another battalion, from Senegal, will be repatriated in June 2008. By 30 September, 2,450 troops will have been repatriated, leaving the Mission's troop strength at 11,691. With regard to the police component, its drawdown will begin before the end of this month: 498 police advisers will depart the Mission in seven stages between now and December 2010, bringing the police strength to 742 personnel by December 2010. We have also been making appropriate adjustments to the civilian staffing of the Mission.

The drawdown of UNMIL is being carried out in a well planned manner so as to minimize threats to the security of the State. The process will also ensure that UNMIL is able to assist the Government in dealing with any serious disruptions or civil disturbances. The drawdown plan is intended to provide the time and space needed for Liberia to build up its own police and military forces and progressively to assume full responsibility for national security.

The drawdown is also being implemented taking into consideration developments in the immediate subregion. UNMIL's military personnel continue to maintain a high level of vigilance in the border areas in order to discourage any cross-border trafficking in weapons or people. However, UNMIL is not in control of events outside Liberia's borders, and we will therefore need to continue to be prudent as we proceed with the troop adjustments, so as not to put the gains we have made at risk, not only for Liberia, but for the subregion as a whole.

Let me conclude by stating that Liberia today is a place of hope, characterized by many positive developments. The country has been free of conflict for the past four years, and there is good news coming out of Liberia. However, the hope and the tranquillity that we see today are tempered by a tenuous and fragile peace. Liberia is still a place where one can wake up in the morning and hear that an argument between two fish sellers in a market has degenerated into an ethnic problem with a wider threat that a house of worship will be burned down. Liberia is still a place where rumours about ritual killings or disappearances can suddenly lead to the burning down of a police station or an attack on Liberian and UNMIL security forces and United Nations vehicles. The security of Liberia continues to rely heavily on the presence of UNMIL military and police forces. That is clear evidence that peace has not taken firm root and that it is not yet time to declare victory and leave the country.

Finally, allow me to express our gratitude to troop-contributing and civilian-police-contributing countries, the personnel of UNMIL and the United Nations country team, as well as to the Economic Community of West African States, the African Union, national and international non-governmental organizations and our bilateral and multilateral partners, which have so tirelessly pursued the cause of peace in Liberia. Together with the excellent cooperation of the Government and all Liberian partners, that makes it truly rewarding — although challenging — to serve as the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Liberia. We count on the Security Council's continued support in our endeavours.

The President: I thank Ms. Løj for her briefing.

There are no further speakers on my list. In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I should now like to invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion of the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.40 a.m.